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Deviating From Order:
The Comic Vision of Joseph Conrad, Gertrude Stein, and Samuel Beckett

by

(C) Barbara C. Rose

A THESIS

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Abstract

Much of the awareness of 20th century literature is the recognition of a surrounding confusion. The challenge, therefore, is to achieve a coherence of expression while remaining open to the diversity of experience. If art imposes order on chaos, how can a writer bring order to anarchy without detracting from its complexity? One solution is to present it as a deviation from order. Just as the definition of darkness as an absence of light presupposes the former presence of light, so too does the concept of disorder assume a previous existence of order. As Georg Lukács notes: "literature must have a concept of the normal if it is to 'place' distortion correctly; that is to say, to see it as distortion."

One literary mode that both fully expresses an awareness of anarchy and imposes form on the sense of chaos is comedy. Comedy embodies the disorderly in a twofold fashion: first, its usual plot consists of the systematic breakdown of an order and its gradual substitution with another; second, because comedy portrays the collapse of order, the stylistic methods themselves are often seemingly irrational and distorted. Yet, although the form may seem imitative, beneath the surface of confusion are techniques which rely on a sense of order and proportion. Comedy, in Gautier's words, is "a logic of the absurd."

This logic is one of incongruity. A sampling of the various theories of comedy reveals that the perception of the incongruous consists of a comparison of some abnormality with a

norm. Hazlitt asserts that "man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be." Fundamental to the comparison of the unideal with the ideal is a criticism of actual life. Gide's declaration, "my function is to disturb," emphasizes the sharply critical bias of comedy.

Three comic novels that represent the distorted aspects of the modern world from a critical perspective are Joseph Conrad's The Secret Agent, Gertrude Stein's Mrs. Reynolds, and Samuel Beckett's Watt. Conrad's work is a comedy of social anarchy; it is a criticism of the stasis of devitalization. Stein's is a comedy of language; Mrs. Reynolds is a criticism of the conventions of language and the modes of experience it is meant to express. Beckett's novel is a comedy of existence; Watt is a criticism of the conventional methods of giving reality an intelligible structure.

The form of comedy that each of these novels shares is the grotesque. The grotesque establishes, in the words of Leo Spitzer, "an intermediate world between reality and irreality." Yet the grotesque world, according to Bakhtin, is "a world that has become alienated." It is thus a deviation from order. Because of its play on the concept of the normal, comedy intelligibly communicates disorder without falsifying it.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	Introduction: Containing the Chaos	1
II	Joseph Conrad: *The Secret Agent* and the Irony of Social Anarchy	15
III	Gertrude Stein: *Mrs. Reynolds* and the Comedy of Language	61
IV	Samuel Beckett: *Watt* and the Dianoetic Laugh	92
V	Conclusion: The Nostalgia for Unity	135
	Bibliography	147

Chapter One

Containing the Chaos

In his Preface to The Order of Things, Michel Foucault recalls his uneasy laughter on reading a passage from Borges' "The Analytic Language of John Wilkins" that "shattered all the familiar landmarks of my thought. . . . breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things." [1] The passage is taken from a certain "Chinese encyclopaedia" that divides animals into the following various groups:

> (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tamed, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. [2]

Foucault's laughter initially arose from his awareness that Borges "simply dispenses with the least obvious, but most compelling, of necessities; he does away with the site, the mute ground upon which it is possible for entities to be juxtaposed." [3]

This sense of an absence of a site, of the lack of any perceivable order operating as a unifying background, is also the import of T. S. Eliot's often quoted conclusion in his review of Ulysses that Joyce's distinct style "is perhaps the only feasible method" of embodying "the immense

panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." [4] Eliot's remark reveals an awareness characteristic of most modernist literature: the world has become, in Robert Frost's words, a "background in hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into bleak and utter chaos." [5] This sensibility of the alienated postromantic artist is summarized in Stephen Spender's observation that "modern art is that in which the artist reflects an awareness of an unprecedented situation in form and idiom." [6] Clearly, the modern artist views his situation as a unique one and encounters the problem, as Joyce had, of expressing an awareness of anarchy and futility in a controlled form. As Frank Lentricchia has observed: "in a world bereft of form, form-making becomes the ultimate value." [7]

Confronted with this recognition of a surrounding confusion, the challenge is to achieve a coherence of expression while remaining open to the diversity of experience. If art imposes order on chaos, how can a writer bring order to anarchy without detracting from its complexity? One solution is the rather unsophisticated concept of imitative form: "the proper way to write a poem about madness is to make the poem itself insanely irrational." [8] Imitative form is, in a sense, a form of strict realism. If the subject is chaos, then the style must be equally chaotic. But disorder cannot be intelligibly communicated by disorder; it can, however, be effectively

rendered if presented as a deviation from order. Just as the definition of darkness as an absence of light presupposes the former presence of light, so too does the concept of disorder assume a previous existence of order. This point, despite its obviousness, is often overlooked. Wherever twentieth century literature has tended to accept, without question, what has been described as the "Waste Land ideology," [9] the confusion of disorder becomes a tenet of uncriticized faith. As Georg Lukács notes: "literature must have a concept of the normal if it is to 'place' distortion correctly; that is to say, to see it as distortion." [10]

Lukács, however, is arguing for a traditional form of realism, the familiar world of the nineteenth century novel. Familiar features, it can be argued, are not the common characteristics of disorder and distortion. Disorder tends toward the unfamiliar and unreal. Thus, a traditional realistic treatment of disorder, if such a thing is possible, is as inadequate and ineffectual as a purely imitative one. Neither method can properly communicate its subject. What is needed then is a balance between the two extreme mimetic techniques of imitative form and traditional realism; a method that José Ortega y Gasset has described as "the dehumanization of art." [11]

In The Dehumanization of Art, Ortega analyzes the process he characterizes as the "will to style." [12] Explaining his statement that "an object of art is art-

istic only in so far as it is not real," he asserts that "to stylize means to deform reality, to derealize; style involves dehumanization. And vice versa, there is no other means of stylizing except by dehumanizing. Whereas realism, exhorting the artist to faithfully follow reality, exhorts him to abandon style." [13] Ortega, however, does not discredit realism or the necessary function it has within a work. Using painting as an example, he argues that the "question is not to paint something altogether different from a man, a house, a mountain, but to paint a man who resembles a man as little as possible;" and concludes:

> It may be thought a simple affair to fight shy of reality, but it is by no means easy. There is no difficulty in painting or saying things which make no sense whatever, which are unintelligible and therefore nothing. One only needs to assemble unconnected words or to draw random lines. But to construct something that is not a copy of "nature" and yet possesses substance of its own is a feat which presupposes nothing less than genius. [14]

To dehumanize is not merely to warp and distort reality; dehumanization also imposes order on the chaos of experience. It is, as Ortega puts it, to paint a man who resembles a man as little as possible.

Elsewhere in The Dehumanization of Art, Ortega defines an "instrument of dehumanization." His definition, however, also describes a literary mode that both fully expresses an awareness of anarchy and imposes form on the sense of

disorder: comedy. Both dehumanization and comedy rely on a concept of the normal:

> The simplest method may be described as a change of perspective. From the standpoint of ordinary human life things appear in a natural order, a definite hierarchy. Some seem very important, some less so, and some altogether negligible. To satisfy the desire for dehumanization one need not alter the inherent nature of things. It is enough to upset the value pattern and to produce an art in which the small events of life appear in the foreground with monumental dimensions. 15

This dependence on a natural order, a definite hierarchy of values, characterizes comedy. Ortega's statement that dehumanization involves an upsetting of the value pattern could, for example, easily summarize the method of the mock heroic. The juxtaposition of the important with the trivial distorts the hierarchy of values and the resulting incongruity is inherently comic. Both dehumanization and comedy cause what aroused Foucault's uneasy laughter, the shattering of familiar landmarks.

The distortion of perspective also recalls Eliot's words. The vast panorama of futility and anarchy is, in some ways, comic. "Existence involves changes and happenings and is comic inherently," writes George Santayana. Contending that "everything in nature [is] lyrical in its ideal essence, tragic in its fate," Santayana believes that the world is "comic in its existence":

> Incongruity is a consequence of change; and this incongruity becomes especially conspicuous when, as in the flux of nature, change is going on at different rates in different strands of being . . .

> The mishaps, the expedients, the merry solutions of comedy . . . belong to the very texture of temporal being; and if people repine at these mishaps, or rebel against these solutions, it is only because their souls are less plastic and volatile than the general flux of nature. 16

Although his words are more of a celebration of nature's flux than an analysis of the comic, Santayana's notion of plasticity suggests an important faculty of comedy. Because it readily accepts the absurd, comedy has a greater scope than many other forms. As Wylie Sypher observes: "comedy, not tragedy, admits the disorderly into the realm of art." [17]

Comedy embodies the disorderly in a twofold fashion. First, its usual plot consists of the systematic breakdown of an order and its gradual substitution with another. [18] Most of the comic confusion reflects the movement from one order to the other. Typical of this is romantic comedy: the union of two young lovers is opposed by a current order, normally represented by either a father, or a law or social convention (all of which are usually portrayed as old, repressive, and potentially dangerous); the two overcome this order, and bring about chaos, by means of deception (trickery, disguise, or confusion of identity); and then proceed to establish a new order, often symbolized by their marriage. Second, because comedy portrays the collapse of order, the stylistic methods themselves are often seemingly irrational and distorted. Yet, although the form may seem imitative, beneath the surface of

confusion are techniques that rely on a sense of order and proportion. In other words, the disorder is presented as a deviation from order. Comedy, in Gautier's words, is "a logic of the absurd." [19]

As a coherent expression of anarchy, comedy is rooted in this logic of the absurd. The logic, as Ortega suggests, is a logic of incongruity. Although theories of comedy abound, and, as Dr. Johnson once observed, "comedy has been particularly unpropitious to definers," [20] central to each definition is an identification of the incongruous. Plato, for example, believes that comedy is "impotence masquerading as power," [21] while for Aristotle it is a species of the ugly and base: "Comedy aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life." [22] According to the German metaphysician Johann Christoph Gottsched, we laugh at "that which seems absurd to our understanding," because comedy consists of "the mental comparison of some eccentricity with a norm." [23] Schopenhauer's explanation, like those of others, relies on a sense of normal or "actual life":

> The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. 24

Each of these definitions recognizes the prevalence of the incongruous, in whatever form it may take. As Hazlitt notes: "The essence of the laughable then is the incongruous,

the disconnecting of one idea from another." [25] Even Bergson's well known theory that laughter arises from the perception of "the mechanical encrusted on the living," [26] reveals this awareness. What becomes clear from this brief sampling of theories is that the perception of the incongruous consists of a comparison of some abnormality with a norm. Hazlitt asserts that "man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they ought to be." [27]

Speculations on comedy, however, are inadequate unless the function of comedy is considered. Or, as J.L. Styan has it: "the values of the comic attitude appear only when we measure the uses to which it is put." [28] Its goal is not merely to arouse laughter. Indeed, comedy is not necessarily humorous. Nor does it function as a light-hearted entertainment, a commonplace assumption that has led one commentator to believe that "whereas in the comedy of earlier times, comic means were used to employ comic ends, in the modern theater comic means are employed to serious ends." [29] The assumption is that, until the advent of the twentieth century, comedy was always a frivolous form of entertainment. Shakespeare's comedies, therefore, must be trifling affairs. Yet the statement is correct in noting the serious nature of comedy when it appears in modernist literature. Hazlitt's observation, that laughter arises from the perception that things as they

are are not what they ought to be, also emphasizes its seriousness. Fundamental to the comparison of the unideal with the ideal is a criticism of actual life. [30] Comedy performs the Arnoldian formula of art as enacted criticism of actual life.

As a criticism of life, comedy tends toward the revolutionary: "comedy is continual rebellion and a refusal . . . to accept the compromises meted out by actuality. It is a continual cry for the perfection of the logical order which is ever possible." [31] Commenting on Gide's declaration, "my function is to disturb," Sypher also emphasizes the sharply critical bias of comedy. Gide is "the classic type of comic artist who is agent provocateur":

> We escape with [comedy] into a logical order by laughing at the imperfections of the world about us; the comic artist releases us from the limitations in things as they are. Chafed by the deficiencies in reality the comedian may be more intransigent than the tragedian. Tragedy accepts the flaws in the world as it is, then ventures to find nobility in "the inexorable march of actual situations." . . . the comedian refuses to make these concessions to actuality and serves, instead, as chief tactician in a permanent resistance movement, or rebellion, within the frontiers of human experience. By temperament the comedian is often a fifth columnist in social life. 32

The comic man is not only the icon of human actuality [33] but also that of human possibility.

In his essay on twentieth century comedy, Nathan A. Scott, Jr. remarks of the early modernist writers, the generation of Joyce and Kafka, that

> their basic premise continues to be the unquestioned axiom of the modern imagination--that what we ultimately face is a Silence, an Absence, a threatening Emptiness at the center. . . . Our dominant metaphors are still metaphors of dearth and deprivation, and the world that is explored and rendered in contemporary fiction is very often . . . a world that has been evacuated of radical significance. . . . when this is the writer's situation, then he will indeed seek out some barely tolerable tour d'ivoire; or else, being given some kind of courage by his very despair, he will simply plunge into the whirling vortex of the world's disorder and make a kind of Absolute out of the sheer absurdity of existence itself. 34

Although Scott's identification of the unquestioned axiom is important, his assertion that the writer, when confronted with a surrounding anarchy, has only two extreme alternatives is (as his operatic tone and penchant for capitalizing key words suggest) too simplistic. There is literature that does question the axiom of the modern imagination, and two writers who criticize the experience of disorder, or the world that has been evacuated of radical significance, are Joseph Conrad and Samuel Beckett. A third, Gertrude Stein, poses a problem. In his study, Literature Against Itself, Gerald Graff asks the pertinent question: "does this art represent a criticism of the distorted aspects of modern life or a mere addition to it?" [35] And some of Stein's writing is, undoubtedly, a mere addition. Thus, her work has been labeled by one detractor as a "comedy of meaninglessness." [36] Meaninglessness, however, can be meaningful; Stein's seemingly irrational

and haphazard style is significant. It represents a criticism of the conventions of language and the modes of experience it is meant to express. Her style questions the limitations of actuality.

Conrad's The Secret Agent, Stein's Mrs. Reynolds, and Beckett's Watt are three comic novels. Each is a representation of the distorted aspects of modern life and the relativity of experience that distortion threatens. Using comedy to express the incongruities of existence and the seeming meaninglessness of life, each novel is an attempt at retrieving some form of significance, or even the mere possibility of meaning, from the outer world.

Notes

[1] Michel Foucault, The Order of Things (New York: Random House, 1970), p. xv.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., p.xvii.

[4] T. S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth," The Dial LXXV (5 November 1923), p. 483.

[5] Robert Frost, Selected Prose of Robert Frost, ed. Hyde Cox and Connory Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1959), p. 107.

[6] Stephen Spender, The Struggle of the Modern (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963), p. 71.

[7] Frank Lentricchia, After the New Criticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 55.

[8] William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, Literary Criticism: A Short History (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 670.

[9] David Craig, "Loneliness and Anarchy: Aspects of Modernism," in his The Real Foundations (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 173.

[10] Georg Lukács, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, trans. J. and N. Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1963), p. 33.

[11] José Ortega y Gasset, The Dehumanization of Art, trans. Helene Weyl (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948).

[12] Ibid., p. 25.

[13] Ibid., pp. 10, 25.

[14] Ibid., p. 23.

[15] Ibid., p. 35.

[16] George Santayana, "Carnival," in his Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies; rpt. in Robert W. Corrigan (ed.), Comedy: Meaning and Form (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), p. 78.

[17] Wylie Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy," in his Comedy; rpt. in Corrigan, p. 23.

[18] Northrop Frye, for example, states in his Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956): "The movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another" (p. 163); and "Thus the humor is intimately connected with the theme of the absurd or irrational law that the action of comedy moves toward breaking" (p. 169).

[19] As cited by Sypher, p. 21.

[20] Samuel Johnson, Rambler, 125 (28 May 1751).

[21] James Feibleman, In Praise of Comedy (New York: Russell & Russell, 1939, repr. 1962), p. 74. The following brief survey of the theory of comedy is largely taken from Feibleman's discussion.

[22] The Poetics, in The Complete Works of Aristotle, trans. Benjamin Jowett, rev. ed. Jonathan Barnes, Bollingen Series, LXXI: 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), Vol. 2, 1448.

[23] As quoted by Feibleman, p. 100.

[24] Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Idea; as cited by Feibleman, p. 102.

[25] William Hazlitt, "On Wit and Humour," in his Lectures on the English Comic Writers (London: J. M. Dent, 1963), p. 7.

[26] Henri Bergson, Laughter, trans. Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1928), p. 37.

[27] Hazlitt, p. 5.

[28] J. L. Styan, "Types of Comedy," in Corrigan, p. 234.

[29] Corrigan, in his Introduction to Comedy, p. 11.

[30] Sypher, p. 58.

[31] Feibleman, p. 192.

[32] Sypher, p. 54.

[33] Ibid., p. 58.

[34] Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "The Bias of Comedy and the Narrow Escape into Faith," in Corrigan, p. 83.

[35] Gerald Graff, Literature Against Itself (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 55.

[36] Feibleman, p. 238.

Chapter Two

Joseph Conrad: The Secret Agent and the Irony of Social Anarchy

Near the end of his Preface to The Secret Agent, Joseph Conrad states rather cryptically:

> I have no doubt, however, that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist, I won't say more than they [the anarchists] but certainly cherishing a more concentrated purpose than any of them had ever done in the whole course of his life. I don't say this to boast. I was simply attending to my business. In the matter of all my books I have always attended to my business. I have attended to it with complete self-surrender. And this statement, too, is not a boast. 1

The phrase, "extreme revolutionist," when coupled with Conrad's defensive tone, has persuaded some commentators that Conrad is expressing a perplexing political creed and, because of the presence of politics in the novel, many critics read The Secret Agent with the aim of precisely identifying Conrad's political ideology. Hence he is often classified under various political labels: "aristo-royalist apologist," "pyrrhonistic Conservative," and "repressed revolutionary," to name only a few.[2] All three terms, it should be noted, are used more or less pejoratively and arise from the frustration that The Secret Agent is not reducible to any single political ideology.

This frustration is the result of various causes.

Foremost is Conrad's inability to openly espouse a definite ideology, be it political or aesthetic. As early as The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' he exhibits an impatience with "isms":

> It is evident that he who, rightly or wrongly, holds by the convictions expressed above cannot be faithful to any one of the temporary formulas of his craft. The enduring part of them--the truth which each only impartially veils--should abide with him as the most precious of his possessions, but they all--Realism, Romanticism, Naturalism, even the unofficial sentimentalism . . . all these gods must, after a short period of fellowship, abandon him--even in the very threshold of the temple--to the stammerings of his conscience and to the outspoken consciousness of the difficulties of his work. (P. x)

Conrad believes that ideologies, although convenient, tend to obscure more than they reveal. Like the artist who "descends within himself" (p. viii), Conrad, as he implies in his Preface to The Secret Agent, disregards the obvious and examines the hidden: "the world generally is not interested in the motives of any overt act but in its consequences. Man may smile and smile but he is not an investigating animal. He loves the obvious" (p. xxii).

Another reason for the exasperation of some critics is the novel's lack of a hero or heroine in the traditional sense. There is no protagonist or "good" character (with the exception of Stevie) with whom the reader may sympathize. Nor is there a clearly defined antagonist. As Douglas Hewitt notes: "there

is no central character in whom the problems of value are worked out, no character who is the focal point of the moral issues involved." [3] Conrad's own various assertions and suggestions underscore this absence of a protagonist who clearly embodies a system of values sanctioned by the author. The title of the novel and the focus on Verloc for the main action of the plot implies that Verloc is the centre of Conrad's attention. In fact, The Secret Agent began as a short story entitled "Verloc." [4] Yet in his Preface, Conrad concentrates on Winnie: "The figures grouped about Mrs. Verloc and related directly or indirectly to her tragic suspicion . . . are the outcome of that very necessity. Personally I have never had any doubt of the reality of Mrs. Verloc's story" (pp. xxvi-xxvii). He concludes the Preface with the assumption that Winnie's story is the same as that of The Secret Agent: "But still I will submit that telling Winnie Verloc's story to its anarchistic end . . . and telling it as I have told it here, I have not intended to commit a gratuitous outrage on the feelings of mankind" (p. xxix). Elsewhere, however, in a letter to Edward Garnett, Conrad states that Winnie's mother is the heroine: "I am no end proud to see you've spotted my poor old woman. You've got a fiendishly penetrating eye for one's most secret intentions. She is the heroine. And you are appallingly quick in jumping upon a fellow." [5]

The letter, however, is in response to Garnett's review of The Secret Agent and Conrad does not dispute any of Garnett's criticisms. On the contrary, he happily agrees with every one of them. Here, as his tone of flattery suggests, Conrad seems to display an eagerness to please others. Finally, what becomes clear from these statements is that with different characters being the protagonist at different times, there can be no single protagonist.

Because Conrad does not openly endorse an ideology by clearly approving of any single character who espouses one, the novel has been described as an "honorable debris of failure."[6] Irving Howe, in his Politics and the Novel, expresses unease at the absence of a character who represents a sanctioned ideology:

> What one misses in The Secret Agent is some dramatic principle of contradiction, some force of resistance; in a word, a moral positive to serve literary ends. Conrad's ironic tone suffuses every sentence, nagging at our attention to the point where one yearns for the relief of direct statement almost as if it were an ethical good. . . . The qualifications required by irony are present in abundance, but it is difficult to determine what is being qualified, which standard of behavior is being singled out for attack or defence. So peevish an irony must have its source less in zeal or anger than in some deep distemper. 7

Implicit in Howe's complaints is the assumption that irony, as a form of comedy, is aesthetically and morally unsuitable for a subject as serious as politics. Or,

as another commentator, R. A. Gekoski, has it: "the successful control and ironic thrust of The Secret Agent is purchased at the cost of a certain fundamental seriousness." [8]

Howe's understanding of irony is limited to the corrective type common to satire: "in such corrective or normative uses of irony, the victim to be exposed and discomfited is singled out; he is 'in the wrong' and, by contrast, those to whom he is exposed are 'in the right' or at least safe from this particular attack." [9] Irony, however, is not necessarily satiric or "specific, singling out a victim who has offended against the mores of the community." [10] The "moral positive" that Howe believes the novel lacks is an integral part of Conrad's irony. Irony relies on a double vision; in describing things as they are in terms of what they might be, it compares actuality with possibility. Or as Kierkegaard, in The Concept of Irony, writes:

> Irony in the eminent sense directs itself not against this or that particular existence but against the whole given actuality of a certain time and situation. . . . It is not this or that phenomenon but the totality of existence which it considers sub specie ironiae. 11

Irony, as a form of comedy, is a criticism of actual life.

Hence Conrad's statement that while writing the novel he became, like the comic agent provocateur, an "extreme revolutionist." Desiring to shock his readers

out of their complacency, he resembles Vladimir: "'[it] must be sufficiently startling--effective'" (p. 30). In his Preface he writes: "Even the purely artistic purpose, that of applying an artistic method to a subject of that kind, was formulated with deliberation and in the earnest belief that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity" (p. xxvii). His ironic treatment fulfills the artistic requirement set forth in his Preface to The Nigger of the 'Narcissus': "My task which I am trying to achieve is . . . before all, to make you see" (p. ix).

Hewitt, in his Reassessment, remarks on the sharply critical nature of Conrad's method: "the irony of The Secret Agent . . . is offensive; it is a weapon to undermine comfortable assumptions and to make us scrutinize more deeply our beliefs and values."[12] His observation, although it correctly identifies the aggressiveness of Conrad's irony, neglects to justify the ironic method. If Conrad is intent on criticism why, for example, does he not write in the form of direct critical statement that Howe thinks necessary for the novel's success?

One reason for Conrad's choice of comedy is the novel's plot and characters. The Secret Agent could easily have been a tragedy. Winnie's plight, for instance, is in many respects tragic: "it is one of the

traditional ironies of knowledge, discovered by Oedipus and continually rediscovered, that the lack of it brings destruction but the finding of it only seals that destruction." [13] Conrad describes Winnie's conviction that "life doesn't stand much looking into" as tragic (p. xxvii), and yet, when Winnie finally realizes the truth, more tragedy follows. Conrad, however, seems intent on restraining the novel's tragic potential. Hence the reader learns very early of Stevie's death. In so structuring the novel, Conrad prepares the reader for the actual event and consequently, although he does not diminish its gruesomeness, deflects much of the pathos that would normally result from such a death. This sympathy that Conrad purposely curtails is necessary to tragedy. As Aristotle writes, tragedy requires admirable characters: "Tragedy presents men as better . . . than in actual life." [14] In an essay on Conrad, John Galsworthy defends this disinclination to portray such noble characters:

> There is a natural tendency in departmental man, and perhaps especially in Englishmen, to demand of authors that they shall create what are called "interesting" characters, not common sailors, anarchists, or outcasts of the islands--but persons of a certain rank and fashion: persons not living in "sordid squalor" but in gilt-edged certainty; persons not endowed with the heroism and the failings of poor human nature, but with gentility; in a word, persons really interesting. [15]

The only character in The Secret Agent who could be described as noble is Stevie. Stevie, however, is a pathetic idiot whose deficiencies necessitate a passive role. With the possible exception of Dickens' Smike, it is only with such later writers as Beckett that a halfwit, instead of being a passive sufferer or victim, can be presented as an active hero.

Another reason for Conrad's choice of comedy as a critical weapon is the subject of The Secret Agent. Conrad does not concentrate his criticism solely on Verloc and the anarchists. They are only part of a larger disorder, the chaos caused by social breakdown. Avrom Fleishman notes: "The Secret Agent is . . . not so much a novel about political anarchism as it is a novel about social anarchy. It is a dramatic portrayal of the sociological concept of 'anomie'--radical disorder in the social structure and consequent personal dislocation." [16] In the Preface, Conrad remarks of the bomb outrage that "perverse unreason has its own logical processes" (p. xxiv), and comedy can not only criticize disorder but can also embody the logic of perverse unreason. In criticizing disorder Conrad must first portray it and comedy, as previously noted, admits the disorderly into the realm of art.

Conrad reveals his preoccupation with order and its collapse as early as The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' and, interestingly, on the title page of the first

edition of The Secret Agent, published in 1907 by Methuen, Conrad is named as the "Author of 'The Nigger of the "Narcissus"'" [17] Eloise Knapp Hay, in The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad, elaborates on this detail:

> This may well have been Conrad's choice and not the editor's. Methuen had published nothing of Conrad's before but The Mirror of the Sea, which had appeared the previous year. The relevance of The Nigger of the 'Narcissus', though not obvious to the reader, seems to have been clear to the author himself. Conrad's most intense and extended novel centering on life at sea looks forward in several respects to his most intense and extended novel centering on life in a city. In the middle of writing the first bedroom scene between Winnie and Adolf Verloc, on p. 160 of the Rosenbach manuscript, Conrad stopped to sketch a small boat at the top of the page, as if once more contemplating a voyage. 18

In The Secret Agent the city of London represents the social structure that the "Narcissus" symbolizes. The novel portrays the spiritual malaise characteristic of urban life in the post-industrial city, social alienation and its consequent fragmentation. [19] Conrad's famous letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham describing the world as a knitting machine, a metaphor of a mechanical and indifferent universe, typifies this sense of alienation:

> There is a--let us say--a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps

> of iron and behold!--it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider--but it goes on knitting. You come and say: "this is all right; it's only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this--for instance--celestial oil and the machine shall embroider a most beautiful design in purple and gold." Will it? Alas no. You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident--and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can't even smash it. In virtue of that truth one and immortal which lurks in the force that made it spring into existence it is what it is--and it is indestructible.
>
> It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions--and nothing matters. I'll admit however that to look at the remorseless process is sometimes amusing. 20

The knitting machine, as Fleishman remarks, "would, for a mind like Conrad's, be a natural symbol of the modern industrial world." [21] The image, when linked with Conrad's sense of futility and helplessness, recalls the Hegelian idea that the industrial world had estranged mankind from the natural and material world.

One of comedy's methods for portraying disorder is transforming the familiar into the unfamiliar. In The Secret Agent, Conrad presents the city as alien. None

of the characters feels comfortable or "at home" in it. More particularly, many are foreigners or, as with the Assistant Commissioner, have previously lived in the colonies. Verloc's walk to the embassy, for example, is a stroll through an otherworldly city: "Mr. Verloc was going westward through a town without shadows in an atmosphere of powdered gold" (p. 11). London is unfamiliar to its inhabitants; Ossipon "walked through Squares, Places, Ovals, Commons, through monstrous streets with unknown names where the dust of humanity settles inert and hopeless out of the stream of life" (p. 300). The city is "only a vast blank" to Winnie: "She was alone in London: and the whole town of marvels and mud, with its maze of streets and its mass of lights, was sunk in a hopeless night, rested at the bottom of a black abyss from which no unaided woman could scramble out" (pp. 270-71). The city is not a thriving mass of humanity, vital and alive. Instead, it is silent and sepulchral. Conrad describes the neighbourhood of the embassy, for example, with a number of references to, and suggestions of, sterility, decay and death:

> In its breadth, emptiness, and extent it had the majesty of inorganic nature, of matter that never dies. The only reminder of mortality was a doctor's brougham arrested in august solitude close to the curbstone. The polished knockers of the doors gleamed as far as the eye could reach, the clean windows shone with a dark opaque lustre. And all was still. (P. 14)

Describing the city as a weird sort of necropolis, a place not intended for the living, Conrad emphasizes its almost inviolable otherness and London becomes not only alien and unknown but quite unknowable.

The city also dislocates individuals; in it characters tend to lose their identity. The Assistant Commissioner is "assimilated" by "the genius of the locality" (p. 147). Dining in the Italian restaurant, he

> made to himself the observation that the patrons of the place had lost in the frequentation of fraudulent cookery all their national and private characteristics. . . . these people were as denationalized as the dishes set before them with every circumstance of unstamped respectability. Neither was their personality stamped in any way, professionally, socially, or racially. . . . And he himself had become unplaced. (P. 149)

The figures in this urban setting also tend to become substanceless. Policemen, frequently in the background throughout the novel, often fade in and out of the landscape. While walking to the embassy, Verloc observes "a thick police constable, looking a stranger to every emotion, as if he, too, were part of inorganic nature, surging apparently out of a lamp-post" (p. 14). Before entering Verloc's shop, the Assistant Commissioner first watches Brett Street:

> Only a fruiterer's stall at the end of the corner made a violent blaze of light and colour. Beyond, all was black, and the few people passing in that direction vanished at one stride

> beyond the glowing heaps of oranges and lemons. No footsteps echoed. They would never be heard of again. . . . The policeman on the beat projected his sombre and moving form against the luminous glory of oranges and lemons, and entered Brett Street without haste. The Assistant Commissioner, as though he were a member of the criminal classes, lingered out of sight, awaiting his return. But this constable seemed to be lost for ever to the force. He never returned. (PP. 150-51)

Not only are policemen representative of social order but they are also commonly associated with an urban setting. Here, however, their insubstantiality suggests their inadequacy.

Instead of being a life-supporting conglomeration of humanity, the city, in draining people of their individuality and their very substance, is also indifferent and often hostile. Conrad portrays London, in the afternoon after Stevie's death that morning, as one gigantic mass insensitive to the individual:

> It was a raw, gloomy day of the early spring; and the grimy sky, the mud of the streets, the rags of the dirty men harmonized excellently with the eruption of the damp, rubbishy sheets of paper soiled with printers' ink. The posters, maculated with filth, garnished like tapestry the sweep of the curbstone. The trade in afternoon papers was brisk, yet, in comparison with the swift, constant march of foot traffic, the effect was of indifference, of a disregarded distribution. (P. 79)

Describing the scene in terms of garbage and refuse, Conrad not only underscores the waste of Stevie's life

but also emphasizes the devitalizing features and emptiness of the urban world. This indifference, when perceived by an isolated character, can appear as hostility. Verloc, while looking out the window, itself an image of isolation, sees the street below as unfriendly: "a fragile film of glass stretched between him and the enormity of cold, black, wet, muddy, inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates and stones, things in themselves unlovely and unfriendly to man. Mr. Verloc felt the latent unfriendliness of all out of doors" (p. 56). The accumulation of adjectives and nouns, in contrast to the figure of the single man, emphasizes the solitariness of Verloc. Thus, Conrad's presentation of London exceeds an elaboration of "mere ugliness" (p. xxii). The city is not merely a setting or backdrop, it is, like the London of Bleak House, a threatening presence, alien and inhuman.

This presence of ugliness in comedy, be it physical grotesqueness or mental deformity, has been noted by commentators since Plato. Often the ugliness, as in Conrad's portrayal of the city, represents a state of being. Thus the devitalizing attributes of the city typify the dehumanized state of the novel's characters. Conrad's descriptions of physical appearances emphasize the dehumanized condition by steadily negating a

character's human attributes. He accomplishes this by upsetting the hierarchy of value that Ortega writes of, the comic method of "confusing the categories of actuality." [22] Conrad's frequent reference to the animal kingdom when describing a character is the most evident example of this. In the natural order a human is superior to an animal and "any reference downward in the hierarchy of value is comic." [23] Verloc is the character most commonly described in this manner. In his interview with Vladimir he displays "a sort of passive insensibility interrupted by slight convulsive starts, such as may be observed in the domestic dog having a nightmare on the hearthrug. And it was in an uneasy doglike growl that he repeated the word" (p. 34). Vladimir remarks of him, "'He's fat--the animal'" (p. 19), and later describes Verloc as a "'lying dog of some sort'" (p. 226). Conrad's description of Mrs. Neale reveals the full significance of this method: "On all fours amongst the puddles, wet and begrimed, like a sort of amphibious and domestic animal living in ash-bins and dirty water" (p. 184). She is presented as a dehumanized creature; in a servile position (her name might be a pun), she resembles not merely an animal but a lower life form. Commenting on this method of negation, Fleishman remarks: "The entire society comes to be seen as a jungle of animal forms obeying the laws of predatory

survival. Alien to this world, forced to live in it yet inevitably devoured, men acquire the characters of beasts." [24] Yet, while men may acquire the characters of beasts, their society is not necessarily that of a ferocious jungle. As with Verloc who is most frequently associated with either domestic animals or tamed wild beasts, others are described as harmless animals. Characters may be predators, but they latch onto their prey like parasites.

Conrad uses yet another method to suggest this dehumanized state of being. Not only does he warp the perspective through equating characters with animals but also through distorting the normal focus. Instead of concentrating on the whole body or face of a character, the narrative eye isolates individual physical features. In again describing Verloc as an animal, Conrad focuses on his mouth: "He paused, and a snarl lifting his moustaches above a gleam of white teeth gave him the expression of a reflective beast, not very dangerous" (p. 257). He also draws attention to the Secretary of State's mouth: "Sir Ethelred opened a wide mouth, like a cavern, into which the hooked nose seemed anxious to peer" (p. 138). This concentration on one part of the body changes the normal into the abnormal. A patron of the Italian restaurant appears nonhuman: "his eye followed the long back of a tall, not very young girl, who passed up to a distant table looking

perfectly sightless and altogether unapproachable" (p. 149). In concentrating on the inorganic eyeglasses of the Chancelier d'Ambassade instead of his face, Conrad suggests that the wearer himself is inorganic.[25] Verloc is made uneasy by "the sense of being blinked at watchfully behind the blind glitter of these eyeglasses" (p. 18). Similarly, The Professor's eyeglasses become a chilling representation of the Professor himself:

> Ossipon had a vision of these round black-rimmed spectacles progressing along the streets on the top of an omnibus, their self-confident glitter falling here and there on the walls of houses or lowered upon the heads of the unconscious stream of people on the pavements. The ghost of a sickly smile altered the set of Ossipon's thick lips at the thought of the walls nodding, of people running for life at the sight of those spectacles. (P. 63)

By centering on the parts instead of the whole of the body, Conrad creates a disconcerting atmosphere in which the sense of the normal is distorted. Such physical details underscore the novel's theme of social fragmentation and also recall Stevie's fate, as in the policeman's statement: "'Look at that foot there. I picked up the legs first, one after another'" (p. 89).

Like Conrad's presentation of the eyeglasses as representative of the Professor himself, characters are further denumanized into inanimate matter: "Closely

related to the reduction of man to fragments is his reduction to inorganic matter." [26] Verloc is "like a rock--a soft kind of rock" (p. 13), and Winnie, lying in bed, is "massive and shapeless like a recumbent statue in the rough" (p. 179). Sir Ethelred also seems as if made of stone: "The great Personage might have been the statue of one of his own princely ancestors stripped of a crusader's war harness, and put into an ill-fitting frock coat" (p. 138). Conrad's description of Sir Ethelred, in its resemblance to the mock heroic, not only ridicules the Secretary's ineffectiveness and his trivial cause but also suggests the lack of human qualities of a devitalized condition.

As inanimate matter, characters finally come to resemble machines. [27] Conrad portrays the populace of London as a mass of parasites, mechanistic in their unreasoning and seemingly involuntary behaviour. The Professor, amid the "swift, constant march of foot traffic" (p. 79),

> became disagreeably affected by the sight of the roadway thronged with vehicles and of the pavement crowded with men and women. He was in a long, straight street, peopled by a mere fraction of an immense multitude; but all round him, on and on, even to the limits of the horizon hidden by the enormous piles of bricks, he felt the mass of mankind mighty in its numbers. They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants, thoughtless like a natural force, pushing on blind and orderly and absorbed, impervious to sentiment, to logic, to

terror, too, perhaps. (PP. 81-82)

The Professor, too, is more of a machine than a living being. As the "perfect anarchist" (p. 82) he resembles his "perfect detonator" (p. 69). Separated from the living world, he is no longer fully human: "He walked with the nerveless gait of a tramp going on, still going on, indifferent to rain or sun in a sinister detachment from the aspects of sky and earth" (p. 96). The Professor also resembles a machine. Conrad describes how "All his movements--the way he grasped the mug, the act of drinking, the way he set the heavy glass down and folded his arms--had a firmness, an assured precision" (p. 63). His actions lack the natural movements of a living being; his "thin, livid lips snapped together firmly. . . . This was meant for a contemptuous jeer, though the expression of the thin, sickly face remained unchanged" (p. 65). Speaking, between the precise mechanical movements of lifting the glass to his mouth and rigidly putting it down again, he "paused, tranquil, with that air of close, endless silence, then almost immediately went on" (p. 69). As a human machine the Professor is a living mechanism; attached to his body is the bomb that only lacks a perfect detonator.

The immobility characteristic of many of the characters also suggests mechanistic behaviour.

Conrad portrays the corpulent Michaelis, whose arm resembles a "dummy's limb" (p. 42), as suffering from a shortness of breath [which] took all fire, all animation out of his voice" (p. 44). Ossipon, after Winnie's suicide, is also able to "remain sitting still for hours without stirring a limb or an eyelid" (p. 301); and his actions can have the same precise, unnatural quality of the Professor's: "His eyes stared at the ceiling. And suddenly they closed. Comrade Ossipon slept in the sunlight" (p. 301). Conrad also depicts Verloc as a mechanical being. Suffering from "fanatical inertness" (p. 12), he is, like Ossipon, capable of prolonged immobility: "Mr. Verloc had not changed his position; he had not apparently stirred a limb for an hour and a half" (p. 38). Finally, after Stevie's death, he comes to resemble an automaton:

> Mr. Verloc obeyed woodenly, stoney-eyed, and like an automaton whose face had been painted red. And this resemblance to a mechanical figure went so far that he had an automaton's absurd air of being aware of the machinery inside of him. (P. 197)

Devoid of all that is natural and human, these characters are devitalized to an inorganic and mechanical state of being.

Conrad underscores this dehumanized condition by further distorting the normal perspective. While living beings become inanimate, inorganic matter is

animate. In contrast to the immobility characteristic of many of the characters, buildings come alive. Houses, for example, have a habit of straying (pp. 14-15), and buildings tend to watch the passers-by. Winnie and her mother are regarded on their way to the charity houses: "And for a time the walls of St. Stephen's with its towers and pinnacles contemplated in immobility and silence a cab that jingled" (p. 157). Ossipon, while walking home, is also watched: "Later on the towers of the Abbey saw in their massive immobility the yellow bush of his hair passing under the lamps. The lights of Victoria saw him, too, and Sloane Square, and the railings of the park" (p. 300). Anarchists and secret agents, afraid of being watched by police or spies, are silently and indifferently regarded by buildings. The buildings themselves, although immobile, are more alive than their inhabitants.

Conrad further compares the devitalized characters with their lively setting by animating objects which, in contrast to the impersonal and often immobile people, have highly active personalities. One of the most notable objects which seems to come to life is the player piano in the Silenus restaurant. Instead of a piano which produces music through human skill and talent, Conrad presents the piano as mechanical, thereby negating the human role. The player piano

is therefore independent, "without as much as a music stool to help it" (p. 79), and assumes a personality of its own. Endowing it with human characteristics, Conrad repeatedly describes its mechanical and "painfully detached notes" (p. 79) that suddenly start and abruptly stop: "The mechanical piano . . . played through a valse cheekily, then fell silent all at once as if gone grumpy" (p. 310). It "executed suddenly all by itself a valse tune with aggressive virtuosity" (p. 61) and "clanged through a mazurka with brazen impetuosity, as though a vulgar and impudent ghost were showing off. The keys sank and rose mysteriously. Then all became still" (p. 67). In the Silenus are Ossipon and the Professor, and the capricious player piano, although a mechanism, is more animated and alive than they are: "the lonely piano . . . struck a few chords courageously, and beginning a section of national airs, played [Ossipon] out at last to the tune of 'Blue Bells of Scotland'" (p. 79). In refering to the piano so often, Conrad draws attention to its animate features and clearly contrasts its lively behaviour to the two men.

The disordered world represented in The Secret Agent is not so much a chaotic one, like the whirling confusion of Stevie's circles, but is a condition of stasis. Not only are individual characters devitalized but the state of being that characterizes the novel is

static and unchanging, and hence mechanical. Edward Garnett, in his 1907 review of the novel, criticizes this pervasive inertia:

> While the psychological analysis of the characters' motives is as full of acumen as is the author's philosophical penetration into life, it is right to add that Mr. Verloc and his wife are less convincing in their actions than in their meditations. There is a hidden weakness in the springs of impulse of both these figures, and at certain moments they become automata. 28

Garnett, quite clearly, has missed the point. He is correct, however, in identifying Conrad's preference for psychological inquiry rather than a presentation of events. Except for Stevie's death, Verloc's murder, and possibly Winnie's suicide, there is very little action in The Secret Agent, and Conrad purposely minimizes the immediacy of these events. He presents the deaths of Stevie and Winnie in the form of second-hand information. Similarly, Conrad decreases the action of Verloc's murder. Not only does the murder seem to take a long time to Verloc who, paralyzed with fear, watches the shadow of Winnie's arm slowly move toward him, but Conrad, through the repetition of a phrase, purposely slows down the action:

> He saw partly on the ceiling and partly on the wall the moving shadow of an arm with a clenched hand holding a carving knife. It flickered up and down. Its movements were leisurely. They were leisurely enough for Mr. Verloc to

> recognize the limb and the weapon.
>
> They were leisurely enough for him to take in the full meaning of the portent, and to taste the flavour of death rising in his gorge. His wife had gone raving mad--murdering mad. They were leisurely enough for the first paralyzing effect of the discovery to pass away before a resolute determination to come out victorious from the ghastly struggle with that armed lunatic. They were leisurely enough for Mr. Verloc to elaborate a plan of defence involving a dash behind the table, and the felling of the woman to the ground with a heavy wooden chair. But they were not leisurely enough to allow Mr. Verloc that time to move either hand or foot. The knife was already planted in his breast. (PP. 262-63)

Conrad's portrayal of the murder scene suggests stasis in a number of ways. He diminishes its immediacy by presenting the action through Verloc's eyes or, more precisely, his thoughts. In watching the shadow instead of Winnie's actual arm, the physical action is, in a sense, once removed for Verloc. Moreover, through the repetition of the word "leisurely" (itself a word denoting inactivity) and the phrase "they were leisurely enough," Conrad reduces any impression of action.

In diminishing the action Conrad must concentrate on the characters' psychological state, and the inner life he portrays is also a static one. This static inner life, as a private world, results in isolated individuals insulated from the world around them.

Fleishman, commenting on this isolation, notes Conrad's impressive use of the language of secrecy:

> Immediately, on the title page, the fragmented condition of the world is expressed in the language of secrecy. "Secret" is used more than fifty times in The Secret Agent . . . On about half of these occasions the word merely refers to Verloc or to his profession. But most of the other uses of the word characterize human states of being, emotions, conditions, and moral qualities: "secret ardor," "secret scorn," "secretly much affected," "secret griefs," "secretly outspoken thought," "secrecy of his heart," "secret liberation," "secret weakness," "secret fear," "secret of good nature," "secret of guilty breasts," "secret habits of mind." We may gather that the individuals of this novel live their lives enclosed within themselves. That this self containment is a universal human condition is suggested by the more general uses of the term: "secret of fate," "secret ills of existence," "secret ways of the future," and (most generally) "secrecy." 29

Secrecy implies isolation and most of the characters of The Secret Agent are isolated in their own private worlds, closed and self-contained. Secrecy also suggests ignorance or the lack of communication that results, for example, in the Verlocs' misconception of their marriage. Their marriage is "a domestic feeling, stagnant and deep like a placid pool, whose guarded surface hardly shuddered" (p. 243); it is a stasis broken only by the extreme actions of Stevie's death and Verloc's murder.

Stasis, as a result of isolation, is also apparent

in the sterility of their marriage. Not only are the Verlocs childless but the possibility of children is never raised. Nor is this sterility confined to them. The narrator twice mentions the existence of children (Mrs. Neale's and the ones that annoy the Professor) but they are not portrayed. Only once does Conrad depict a child in the vast city of London: "well beyond the open gate could be seen the broad back of a policeman watching idly the gorgeous perambulator of a wealthy baby being wheeled in state across the Square" (p. 23). The focus, however, is on the perambulator, not the bundle it carries. Similarly, certain characters have a perverse resemblance to children. Stevie, although physically an adult, has the mind of a child, and Vladimir resembles a grotesque, overgrown baby: "he had with his smooth and rosy countenance the air of a preternaturally thriving baby" (p. 19).

One of the chief causes of this isolation is, like Verloc's assumption that he is "loved for himself" (p. 251), egoism. As Conrad remarks of the anarchists: "The way of even the most justifiable revolutions is prepared by personal impulses disguised into creeds"(p. 81). They are motivated not by altruism but by vanity, "the mother of all noble and vile illusions, the companion of poets, reformers,

charlatans, prophets, and incendiaries" (p. 53). Michaelis, for example, is oblivious to the world about him and obsessed with his naive vision of a better world: "Michaelis pursued his idea--the idea of his solitary reclusion--the thought vouchsafed to his captivity and growing like a faith revealed in visions. He talked to himself . . . indifferent indeed to their presence" (p. 44). The Professor, whose past "had filled him with such an exalted conviction of his merits that it was extremely difficult for the world to treat him with justice" (p. 75), would destroy the world not to create a better one but as revenge for his sense of wounded pride: "By exercising his agency with ruthless defiance he procured for himself the appearances of power and personal prestige" (p. 81).

Stasis also characterizes the social system the anarchists seek to overthrow. Heat, as a representative of this order, is as egoistic as the revolutionaries:

> The encounter did not leave behind with Chief Inspector Heat that satisfactory sense of superiority the members of the police force get from the unofficial but intimate side of their intercourse with the criminal classes, by which the vanity of power is soothed, and the vulgar love of domination over our fellow-creatures is flattered as worthily as it deserves. (P. 122)

As Conrad's choice of "our" suggests, the vulgar love of domination is a universal human trait. Heat, for

example, does not concern himself with justice but merely follows the "rules of the game" (p. 123), a game that allows him to win. Similarly, the Assistant Commissioner's motivation is not so much a sense of justice (for he is certain of the innocence of Michaelis) but a desire for domestic peace. The incarceration of Michaelis would upset the lady patroness which, in turn, would anger his wife (p. 112). With selfishness as their motivation, these two representatives of law and order merely maintain the rigid status quo.

As a game with its fixed set of rules, the current social order is mechanistic and inflexible. According to Heat, the police and thieves are "products of the same machine, one classed as useful and the other as noxious, they take the machine for granted in different ways, but with a seriousness essentially the same" (p. 92). Like Heat, Verloc is a defender of the status quo: "his mission in life being the protection of the social mechanism, not its perfectionment or even its criticism" (p. 15); and, as with the murder scene, Conrad emphasizes the static quality of this social mechanism through repetition:

> He surveyed through the park railings
> the evidences of the town's opulence
> and luxury with an approving eye.
> All these people had to be protected.
> Protection is the first necessity of

> opulence and luxury. They had to be protected; and their horses, carriages, houses, servants had to be protected; and the source of their wealth had to be protected in the heart of the city and the heart of the country; the whole social order favourable to their hygienic idleness had to be protected against the shallow enviousness of unhygienic labour. (P. 12)

Emblematic of the ruling powers' petrifaction are the perfectly immobile carriages waiting outside the residence of the lady patroness: "Their lamps blazing steadily, the horses standing perfectly still, as if carved in stone, the coachmen sitting motionless under the big fur capes, without as much as a quiver stirring the white thongs of their big whips" (p. 225).

Because of society's rigidness there can be no progress. For Conrad, civilization is merely a thin veneer; progress entails change yet there is no difference between "the age of caverns" and "the age of bar-rooms" (p. 263). Hence another reason for the structure of The Secret Agent: by not presenting the events in chronological order Conrad forestalls any sense of progress and underscores the universality of the static condition.

Conrad also reveals the universality of this condition through his manipulation of language. The state of the language spoken by characters in The Secret Agent indicates their state of being. That speech should, in the natural hierarchy (the same

hierarchy that comedy consistently distorts), separate mankind from the animal kingdom is classic doctrine. Hesiod writes of it in his Theogony, [30] and man, according to Aristotle, is a being of the word. [31] With this possession of speech man's control of the word becomes a means of ordering reality:

> The primacy of the word, of that which can be spoken and communicated in discourse, is characteristic of the Greek and Judaic genius and carried over into Christianity. The classic and Christian sense of the world strive to order reality within the governance of language. Literature, philosophy, theology, law, the arts of history, are endeavors to enclose within the bounds of rational discourse the sum of human experience, its recorded past, its present condition and future expectations. The code of Justinian, the Summa of Aquinas, the world chronicles and compendia of medieval literature, the Divina Commedia, are attempts at total containment. They bear solemn witness to the belief that all truth and realness--with the exception of a small, queer margin at the very top--can be housed inside the walls of language. 32

As an ordering principle the quality of language, or rather its effectiveness, can be a measure of a general state of being. If, as George Steiner states, "languages are living organisms," then a vitality of language presupposes a vitality of being. His observation is pertinent with regard to The Secret Agent: in Conrad's presentation "the language is no longer lived, it is merely spoken." [33]

The ossified condition of the language spoken by many of the characters, and on occasion used ironically in the narration, [34] is evident in the stale, nondescriptive titles given to some characters and the prevalence of clichés throughout the novel. Like Ossipon's reading of Lombroso that typecasts Stevie as a degenerate and yet does not even approach a comprehensive description of Stevie, Conrad presents a number of characters not as individuals but as bearers of titles: the great Personage, the Great Presence, the great lady, the lady patroness, the Secretary of State, and the Assistant Commissioner. With the exception of Sir Ethelred, Conrad refrains from naming these characters. To do so would indivdualize them. Occasionally a title is changed but the new one is equally bland. Chief Inspector Heat, for example, becomes "Private Citizen Heat" (p. 202). Also, Conrad describes Winnie, after Verloc's murder, in the impersonal style of an obituary notice: "Winnie Verloc, the widow of Mr. Verloc, the sister of the late faithful Stevie" (p. 266). Although each of the titles is correct, they do nor precisely describe the individual. In short, they are empty terms. Presented in this manner, the characters cease to be individuals and become anonymous units of the blind and orderly masses.

Clichés also indicate a static condition. Yundt, for instance, speaks in images of atrocities and yet

their force is deadened because much of his language is jargon and delivered in the style of empty revolutionary rhetoric (as in his habitual use of the rhetorical question):

> "And what about the law that marks him still better--the pretty branding instrument invented by the overfed to protect themselves against the hungry? Red-hot applications on their vile skins--hey? Can't you smell and hear from here the thick hide of the people burn and sizzle?" (PP. 47-48)

> "Do you know how I would call the nature of the present economic conditions? I would call it cannibalistic. That's what it is! They are nourishing their greed on the quivering flesh and the warm blood of the people--nothing else." (P. 51)

Images of cannibalism, as George Orwell notes, are peculiar to revolutionary jargon; [35] and for Orwell, as with Conrad, a speaker of such a language betrays his dehumanized condition. He becomes more of a mechanism than a living being:

> When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases--"bestial atrocities," "iron heel," "blood-stained tyranny," "free peoples of the world," "stand shoulder to shoulder"--one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy; a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker's spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem to have no eyes behind them. And this is not altogether fanciful. A speaker who

> uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine. 36

Orwell's description, in its resemblance to the Professor, reveals an attitude similar to Conrad's: such language, in its remoteness from reality, can only further isolate its user from the living world. The speaker ceases to be human and his language becomes, in the words of Arthur Adamov, "worn, threadbare, filed down, words have become the carcass of words, phantom words; everyone drearily chews and regurgitates the sound of them between their jaws." 37

Ossipon also speaks in a worn and threadbare language. On meeting Winnie after Verloc's murder, he speaks to her in the clichés of love common to pulp novels:

> "I've thought of you too often lately not to recognize you anywhere, at any time. I've always thought of you--ever since I first set eyes on you." (P. 271)
>
> "I've been fond of you beyond words ever since I set eyes on your face." (p. 273)
>
> "A love like mine could not be concealed from a woman like you . . . He never did seem quite worthy of you . . . you were worthy of a better fate." (P. 274)
>
> "Unhappy woman! . . . Unhappy, brave woman!" (PP. 276-77)

Unlike the public language of Yundt's political jargon, the language of love, because of its individuality and intimacy, is private. And, because of its privateness,

it becomes part of the speaker's being. As Ian Robinson, in a discussion of love poetry, has put it: "It seems to me . . . that poets don't talk about love, they speak the language of love. If a rather odd phrase can be permitted I'll say poets don't write about love, they write love." [38] However, Ossipon's language, in its tired words and stock phrases, is not a private one. His interest in Winnie, albeit a sexual one, is genuine; yet, because he expresses it in second-hand language, it is as dehumanized as Yundt's.

This failure of language to order reality finally drives Ossipon insane. Throughout The Secret Agent Conrad associates Ossipon with robustness ("robust" is the adjective most often used to describe him) and vitality as in, for example, his "Apollo-like ambrosial head" (p. 309). He is not as much a victim of lethargy and corpulence as many other characters are. Yet, after Winnie's suicide, his guilty knowledge devitalizes him. As the Professor remarks to him: "'You sit at your beer like a dummy'" (p. 309). It is not his guilt, however, that maddens him; it is the description in the newspaper (and there are frequent references to the press throughout the novel) of Winnie's death, written in a bland impersonal style and sprinkled with clichés, that drives Ossipon to insanity:

> "Suicide of Lady Passenger from a cross-Channel Boat." Comrade Ossipon

> was familiar with the beauties of its journalistic style. "An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever. . . ." He knew every word by heart. "An impenetrable mystery. . . ." And the robust anarchist, hanging his head on his breast, fell into a long reverie.
>
> He was menaced by this thing in the very sources of his existence. He could not issue forth to meet his various conquests . . . without the dread of beginning to talk to them of an impenetrable mystery destined. . . . He was becoming scientifically afraid of insanity lying in wait for him amongst these lines. "To hang for ever." It was an obsession, a torture. He had lately failed to keep several of these appointments, whose note used to be an unbounded trustfulness in the language of sentiment and manly tenderness. (P. 307)

As with Winnie, who is disturbed by the journalistic phrase "the drop given was fourteen feet" (p. 268), Ossipon becomes terrified of language: "the mystery of a human brain pulsating wrongfully to the rhythm of journalistic phrases" (pp. 310-11). Distrusting language, Ossipon distrusts reality.

Ossipon's fragmented mind suggests a bleaker view of Conrad's: the breakdown of language leads to chaos and, finally, barbarism; a barbarism implied in the scene of Verloc gorging himself with the roast beef, "laid out in the likeness of funereal baked meats for Stevie's obsequies" (p. 253), a piece of meat closely associated with the remains of Stevie's body spread out like "raw material for a cannibal feast" (p. 86). If

a language is dehumanized it will no longer be able to order reality.

One character who fully experiences language in its immediacy is Stevie. Being an idiot, he innocently believes Yundt's words:

> He had reached the parlour door in time to receive in full the shock of Karl Yundt's eloquent imagery. The sheet of paper covered with circles dropped out of his fingers, and he remained staring at the old terrorist, as if rooted suddenly to the spot by his morbid horror and dread of physical pain. Stevie knew very well that hot iron applied to one's skin hurt very much. His scared eyes blazed with indignation: it would hurt terribly. His mouth dropped open. (P. 49)

> Stevie swallowed the terrifying statement with an audible gulp, and at once, as though it had been swift poison, sank limply into a sitting posture on the steps of the kitchen door. (P. 51)

Stevie's reactions are swift and immediate. His response, "it would hurt terribly," is forceful in its simplicity. In contrast to others, language for Stevie is not removed from reality: he immediately relates Yundt's words to his own experiences and receives them almost as if they were physical objects ("he swallowed the terrifying statement"). Similarly, he reacts to the statements in a physical manner.

Stevie's language is also powerful. Unlike the excessive verbiage of such characters as Yundt, his short, monosyllabic, and instant responses express an

intense sharpness:

> On the box, Stevie shut his vacant mouth first, in order to ejaculate earnestly: "Don't."
>
> The driver, holding high the reins twisted around the hook, took no notice. Perhaps he had not heard. Stevie's breast heaved.
>
> "Don't whip." . . . "You mustn't," stammered out Stevie, violently, "it hurts." (P. 157)

Contrary to the superfluity of both the spoken and written word throughout The Secret Agent, Stevie alternates between short exclamations and silence: "'Bad! Bad! . . . Poor! Poor!' stammered out Stevie, pushing his hands deeper into his pocket with convulsive sympathy. He could say nothing." (p. 167). Silence, as Kafka has suggested, can be more overwhelming than unceasing sound.[39] In either silence or a single word Stevie concentrates more emotion and meaning than is possible for any other character: "That little word [shame] contained all his sense of indignation and horror at one sort of wretchedness having to feed on the anguish of the other" (p. 171). As with other characters, Stevie's language indicates his state of being. Stevie, however, does not merely speak it; he lives it.

Unlike the isolated egoism of other characters, Stevie expresses a nonegoistic, outgoing sympathy. Irving Howe thinks that Conrad is unjustified in portraying such a humane character as an idiot:

> Only one character escapes this heavy irony, and that is Stevie the idiot boy, a literary cousin of Dostoevsky's Myshkin. But unlike Myshkin, poor Stevie cannot support the weight of suffering thrust upon him, for where Dostoevsky's idiot grazes the sublime Conrad's never emerges from the pitiable. Stevie's history is acutely worked in, but he figures merely as a prepared victim, the irony which drenches the others never so much as touching him. He is meant to convey a purity of pathos and to represent the humanitarian impulse in its most vulnerable form; but a character for whom one feels nothing but pity can hardly command the emotion that Conrad intends. [40]

Howe does not seem to realize the full significance of Stevie's characterization; Conrad does not intend him to graze the sublime. Stevie's being both idiot and victim is, moreover, appropriate. As F. M. Cornford has shown in his seminal study, The Origin of Attic Comedy, comedy is rooted in fertility rites. [41] Its protagonist is the fertility god, a hero-victim or pharmakos, whose death and resurrection reunites the community by restoring order:

> If the authentic comic action is a sacrifice and a feast, debate and passion, it is by the same token a Saturnalia, an orgy, an assertation of the unruliness of the flesh and its vitality. Comedy is essentially a Carrying Away of Death, a triumph over mortality by some absurd faith in rebirth, restoration, and salvation. Originally, of course, these carnival rites were red with the blood of victims. The archaic

> seasonal revel brought together the incompatibles of death and life. No logic can explain the magic victory over Winter, Sin, and the Devil. But the comedian can perform the rites of Dionysus and his frenzied gestures initiate us into the secrets of the savage and mystic power of life. Comedy is sacred and secular. [42]

Because of its guarantee of resurrection, death is never taken seriously in comedy: [43] in The Secret Agent the only character to mourn Stevie's death is Winnie. This concern of comedy with mortality, and its implicit criticism of acuality, is fully present throughout the novel. Many critics, most notably Robert Stallman, have discussed the novel's theme of time and its transcendence. [44] The attempted bombing of the Greenwich Observatory, for example, is symbolically an attempt to overcome time and space. Each attempt, however, fails.

Stevie's victimization as the pharmakos also fails. When a society is in disarray a scapegoat becomes necessary: "If a community is deprived of political and legal means to deal with internal divisions and agitations, there will be an irresistible tendency to pin the responsibility for whatever ails it on some individual or individuals close at hand." When the community is homogeneous or uniform in a particular condition, such as the universal stasis in The Secret Agent, the victim is chosen because of his "strangeness": "Aggressive tension tends to polarize against those people who . . . are physically crippled or deformed

or who have some other kind of infirmity, like a speech impediment." [45] Because of his mental deficiencies Stevie is marked as a scapegoat. Yet his death and the symbolic eating of his flesh bring no redemption:

> Traditionally, the death of the hero, preliminary to his bodily or spiritual rebirth and the regeneration of the community, may take the form of tearing to pieces. Dionysus, Osiris, Orpheus, Attis--all are listed by Sir James Frazer in his discussions of primitive rites involving mutilation or disintegration. Christ's crucifixion is the equivalent to the ritual suffering of the individual god-hero, which anticipates the redemption of the race. But Stevie's death--his sparagmos--is totally devoid of any heroism. . . . Nor is any rebirth--either individual or generic--promised for this city lost in night. [46]

Just as Verloc's eating of the meat is a grotesque parody of "the sacramental feast in which the hero's body is eaten by his followers in order to revitalize the community," [47] so too does Stevie achieve a mock apotheosis. If the scapegoat ritual succeeds, if the community has attained a new form of order, the victim is then perceived as a saviour: "It is not surprising that the word pharmakon in classical Greek means both poison and antidote for poison, both sickness and cure." [48] Because Stevie's victimization fails, his apotheosis is false:

> A park--smashed branches, torn leaves, gravel, bits of brotherly flesh and bone, all spouting up together in the manner of a firework. . . . Mrs. Verloc

> closed her eyes desperately,
> throwing upon that vision the
> night of her eyelids, where after
> a rainlike fall of mangled limbs
> the decapitated head of Stevie
> lingered suspended alone, and
> fading out slowly like the last
> star of a pyro technic display. (P. 260)

Stevie's transformation, his epiphany in glory, is only an imaginary one and it is envisioned not by a community but by a single character.

As a hero-victim Stevie is also another comedic character: the eiron, "the ironical man." [49] According to Aristotle, the eiron is often the buffoon, [50] and the form of buffoon in which Conrad presents Stevie is the natural fool:

> The natural fool is the archaic victim who diverts the wrath of the gods from the anointed figure of the king. . . . The fool is vicarious sufferer. He is beaten, reviled, and stricken . . . He may be dwarfed and deformed; he may be an idiot. But the idiot has the wisdom of innocence and the naivete of the child. 51

Yet, like Stevie's suffering as the pharmakos, his related suffering as an eiron brings no redemption. Such a faith in expiation through suffering would, for Conrad, be unacceptable. In a letter to his relative and friend, Marguerite Poradowska, he describes the doctrine of redemptive suffering as "an infamous abomination" which "on the one hand, leads straight to the Inquisition and, on the other, discloses the possibilities of bargaining with the Eternal." [52] For Conrad, such a rationale of misery and its arbitrariness is too easy.

Suffering, as illustrated in Stevie's accidental death and the misery it causes, is merely one outcome of Conrad's vision of the cosmos as a knitting machine. Unlike Myshkin's, Stevie's suffering brings salvation neither to himself nor to the community to which he belongs.

A contemporary review of The Secret Agent describes the novel as a "comedy of the Inferno." [53] Yet, although Conrad examines the causes of his characters' damnation, he cannot offer a Paradiso in its place. To do so would make him guilty of the facile utopianism characteristic of Michaelis and his lady patroness. Suspicious of utopianism, like other "isms," Conrad has no ready solutions. Although this distrust of any solution might appear as cynicism, it is, as J. M. Kertzer has argued, a carefully thought out skepticism. Cynicism, for Conrad, is self-deluding. "Cynicism is a moral failing, a blindness that pretends to be insight;" whereas "skepticism, as Marlow shows, is content with partial wisdom; it is fascinated by riddles; it is a balanced view that leans toward doubt and offers 'ironic insight'." [54] With The Secret Agent Conrad offers an ironic insight into the experience of disorder and the incongruities of existence.

Notes

[1] Joseph Conrad, The Secret Agent, ed. Norman Sherry (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1974), p. xxviii. The pagination of this edition is identical to that of the Dent Uniform Edition (London, 1923-28) and The Complete Works, Canterbury Edition (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1921-26). All future references to the work of Conrad will be given parenthetically within the text.

[2] Ford Madox Ford, Portraits From Life (New York: Macmillan, 1937), p. 65; Kingsley Widmer, "Conrad's Pyrrhonistic Conservatism," Novel, 7, No. 2 (Winter 1974), pp. 133-42; and Gustav Morf, The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad (London: Samston Low, Marston & Co., 1929), pp. 220-221.

[3] Douglas Hewitt, Conrad: A Reassessment (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1952), p. 85.

[4] Norman Sherry, Conrad's Western World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 208.

[5] Edward Garnett (ed.), Letters From Joseph Conrad, 1895-1924 (New York: Charter Books, 1962), p. 204. Rpt. in Norman Sherry's Conrad: The Critical Heritage (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 197.

[6] Irving Howe, Politics and the Novel (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), p. 79.

[7] Ibid., p. 96.

[8] R. A. Gekoski, Conrad: The Moral World of the Novelist (London: Paul Elek, 1978), p. 150.

[9] D. C. Muecke, Irony, The Critical Idiom, 13 (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 66-67.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Søren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates, trans. Lee M. Capel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), p. 271.

[12] Hewitt, p. 88.

[13] Avrom Fleishman, Conrad's Politics (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 193.

[14] Aristotle, The Poetics, in The Complete Works, LXXI: 2.

[15] John Galsworthy, Two Essays on Conrad (Cincinatti: Freelands, 1930), pp. 76-78.

[16] Fleishman, p. 212.

[17] Eloise Knapp Hay, The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 230.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Leo Gurko, "The Secret Agent: Conrad's Vision of Megalopis," Modern Fiction Studies, 4 (Winter 1958-59), 309.

[20] C. T. Watts (ed.), Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 56-57.

[21] Fleishman, p. 27.

[22] Feibleman, p. 179.

[23] Ibid., p. 128.

[24] Fleishman, p. 201.

[25] Donald C. Yelton, in his Mimesis and Metaphor: An Inquiry into the Genesis and Scope of Conrad's Symbolic Imagery (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), pp. 83-84, stresses the influence of Dickens' methods on Conrad's characterization.

[26] Fleishman, p. 198.

[27] David L. Kubal, "The Secret Agent and the Mechanical Chaos," Bucknell Review, 15 (December 1967), 68.

[28] Edward Garnett, review of The Secret Agent, in Nation, 28 September 1907. Rpt. in Norman Sherry, Conrad: The Critical Heritage, p. 193.

[29] Fleishman, p. 190.

[30] Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homerica, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, The Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heineman, 1943), pp. 120-21.

[31] Aristotle, The Politics, in The Complete Works of Aristotle, Vol. 2, 1253.

[32] George Steiner, Language and Silence (New York: Atheneum, 1976), pp. 13-14.

[33] Ibid., p. 96.

[34] Joseph I. Fradin and Jean W. Creighton, "The Language of The Secret Agent: The Art of Non-Life," Conradiana, 1, No. 2 (1968), 23.

[35] George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," from The Orwell Reader (New York: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1956), p. 359.

[36] Ibid., p. 362.

[37] Quoted by Steiner, p. 52.

[38] Ian Robinson, The Survival of English (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 193.

[39] "Now the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence," from Parables and Paradoxes (New York: Schocken Books, 1958), p. 89.

[40] Howe, pp. 96-97.

[41] F. M. Cornford, The Origin of Attic Comedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934).

[42] Sypher, p. 37.

[43] Feibleman, p. 44.

[44] Robert Stallman, "Time and The Secret Agent," in The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium, ed. Robert Stallman (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960), pp. 234-54.

[45] René Girard, "Violence and Representation in the Mythical Text," in his To Double Business Bound (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 185, 195.

[46] Claire Rosenfeld, Paradise of Snakes (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 106-07.

[47] Ibid., p. 107.

[48] René Girard, Violence and the Sacred, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 95.

[49] Cornford, pp. 136-138.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Sypher, pp. 44-45.

[52] J. A. Gee and P. J. Sturm (ed. and trans.), The Letters of Joseph Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska, 1890-1920 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1940), p. 36, letter of September 15, 1891. Cited by Fleishman, p. 27.

[53] Morning Post, 19 September 1907; quoted by Sherry, Critical Heritage, p. 181.

[54] J. M. Kertzer, "'The bitterness of our wisdom': Cynicism, Skepticism and Joseph Conrad," Novel, 16, No. 2 (Winter 1983), 127.

Chapter Three

Gertrude Stein: Mrs. Reynolds and the Comedy of Language

Gertrude Stein has often been charged with producing unintelligible works that merely reflect a meaningless world. Disordered, fractured, and often impenetrable, her writing imitates a confusing age. "The twentieth century," she believed, "has much less reasonableness in its existence than the nineteenth century but reasonableness does not make for splendor . . . It is a time when everything cracks, where everything is destroyed, everything isolates itself, it is a more splendid thing than a period where everything follows itself." [1] Unlike Conrad who distrusts this apparent collapse of order, Stein views it as a challenge to discover new ways of comprehending and organizing reality. As Jacob Korg has said in her defense: "we now understand that the literary revolution and the verbal experiment it involved were not a thrust into chaos but a search for alternative concepts of order." [2]

In one of her many lectures, Stein described what she viewed as the modern predicament: "We really do not know that anything is progressively happening." [3] We know that things are happening but we do not know

if they are progressing toward any significant or even definite end. With this sense of an empty future all that can be trusted is the present and this, according to Stein, is the writer's singular awareness: "The business of Art as I tried to explain in 'Composition as Explanation' is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present." [4] For her, the complete actual present is the only discernable reality.

Having studied under William James, Stein most likely absorbed his notion that the essence of a human being is his consciousness: "to think ourselves as thinkers. This attention to thought as such, and the identification of ourselves with it rather than with any of the other objects which it reveals, is a momentous and in some respects a rather mysterious operation." [5] According to James, thinking is being. Because thinking is a continuous process, consciousness can only be known in the present. As her method in Mrs. Reynolds reveals, Stein is aware that although knowledge is acquired over time, the act of knowing is only a present experience. Thus "present thinking is the final reality." [6]

Present thinking or the complete actual present becomes, in Stein's words, the "continuous present." [7] And, because the business of the artist is to completely

express the continuous present, she is, according to her most noted commentator, Donald Sutherland, "thoroughly a realist." [8] In fact, she came out of a strong tradition of literary realism. As Warner Berthoff argues in his study of American realism, the generation of writers preceding her, as well as her own, wrote realistic novels in "a critical response to the era's multiplying confusions." Strongly influenced by pragmatism and its spokemen such as James, novels written in the mode of critical realism embody two closely connected attitudes: "on the one hand that free opportunistic outlook on all contingencies of life and thought which is at the heart of pragmatism and, on the other, a corresponding appetite for technical experiment and invention." [9]

Stein's realism, however, is a rejection of the traditional methods of representation. Spurning the objective forms of reality, she practises what Korg has called "improved imitation." [10] As she remarks of herself in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas:

> Gertrude Stein, in her work, had always been possessed by the intellectual passion for exactitude in the description of inner and outer reality. She has produced a simplification by this concentration, and as a result the destruction of associational emotion in poetry and prose. She knows that beauty, music, decoration, the result of emotion should never be the cause,

> even events should not be the cause of emotion nor should they be the material of poetry and prose. Nor should emotion itself be the cause of poetry or prose. They should consist of an exact reproduction of either an outer or an inner reality. 11

Her numerous literary portraits and such works as Tender Buttons reveal this concern for an exactitude of description. They are experiments in "radical mimesis." [12] The descriptions, however, are usually of an inner reality of the subject rather than the object, of the act of perception rather than its focus. Because the emphasis is on the subjective experience of perception, her writing presents a series of disconnected moments, a "succession of 'nows'" of equal importance. Thus, Stein's method of representation inevitably consists of "transcribing the incoherencies of a disordered aspect of the mind." [13]

Yet Stein's often quoted remark, "There is no real reality," [14] seems to undermine any concern with exactitude. But if knowledge is, in the terms of James, a continuous process of acquaintance, there can be no absolute truth: "How do you know anything, well you know anything as complete knowledge as having it completely in you at the actual moment that you have it. That is what knowledge is, and essentially therefore knowledge is not succession but an immediate existing." [15]

Reality, although not final, is relative to each perceiver. It is "immediate existing"; and because it is immediate Stein attempts to mimetically reproduce it: "I have been trying in every possible way to get the sense of immediacy, and practically all the work I have done has been in that direction." [16] She creates this immediacy through a "reduction of outer reality to the last and simplest abstractions of the human mind." [17] Stein avoids those actions of the mind, such as memory, anticipation, and association, that she considers unimportant or obstructive. Instead, her method concentrates on the moment of undistracted awareness. She does not represent the object of perception but rather the subject in the act of perception: "when the perceiver's role is dominant in a mimetic program, the object of perception seems correspondingly reduced, perhaps lost sight of altogether in a faithful rendering of the perceiver's thought process." [18] Thus Stein is not concerned with experience but with "experiencings." [19] Her reality is not objective; it is subjective, private, and often becomes obscure. Hence the frequent charge that her work is unintelligible.

With Mrs. Reynolds, described by Sutherland as a masterpiece, [20] the focus is on Mrs. Reynolds' experiencings:

Why should they said Mrs. Reynolds why

> indeed should they when after all
> everybody wants what they have.
> Mrs. Reynolds thought about this
> she did not talk about this because
> it might frighten her, she did not
> talk about it even to Mr. Reynolds
> but she did know that it was true
> they did all want what they had and
> when they have it they want it and
> when it is not what they have they
> want it. Want is a funny word said
> Mrs. Reynolds and she meant what she
> said want is a funny word, it means
> to want that is to be going to have
> or to be going without and either
> way said Mrs. Reynolds and now she
> did begin to talk either way you do
> see people again even if it is not
> so very likely and when you do you do
> say oh Therese and then the servant
> who has married and has two children
> and most unexpectedly comes to say
> how do you do and it is not very
> pleasant weather. 21

No outward physical details, such as place and time, are given. Nor are the objects of her musings, with the exception of the word "want" and the former servant, described. The antecedents of "they" and "it," for example, are never identified. Instead, Stein only presents Mrs. Reynolds' thought processes. The emphasis is not on <u>what</u> Mrs. Reynolds sees, feels, or thinks, but on <u>how</u> she experiences them.

Mrs. Reynold's quality of mind is, in many respects, pefectly suited to Stein's purposes. It is homely and unquestioning, never going beneath the surfaces of things:

> When a husband dies and leaves his
> wife alive, she does not attend the

> funeral, not in some places, when the son dies, the mother attends the funeral but not the father, not in some places, and when Mrs. Reynolds thought about this she tried to explain it but she could not and so said she it does just happen that way, that is the way it is. (P. 128)

She does not ponder death but thinks of the various funeral rites. Nor can she explain these customs. Her passiveness of mind allows her to be an ideal receptor of the continuous present. Mrs. Reynolds, in fact, challenges the notion of character; it is very similar to Nathalie Sarraute's statement in The Age of Suspicion that both the reader and the novelist have lost faith in the character. [22]

Mrs. Reynold's meandering thoughts are impressions of a larger disorder, that of wartime. In an epilogue to the novel, Stein writes:

> This book is an effort to show the way anybody could feel these years [1942-1944]. It is a perfectly ordinary couple living an ordinary life and having ordinary conversations and really not suffering personally from everything that is happening but all over them, all over them is the shadow of two men, and then the shadow of one of the two men gets bigger and then blows away and there is no other. There is nothing historical about this book except the state of mind. (P. 267)

The passage leaves many subjects unidentified. The two men, as she told a reporter from Vogue magazine, are Hitler and Stalin (represented in Mrs. Reynolds by

Angel Harper and Joseph Lane).[23] The possessor of "the state of mind" is not identified but, because it is "historical," it can be that of both Mrs. Reynolds and the community to which she belongs. The state of confusion is both an individual and collective state of being.

Stein suggests a disordered condition through various means. At the beginning of Mrs. Reynolds she presents a number of characters, many of whom are never to appear in the novel again:

> Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds knew the district-attorney. He was a pleasant man. He wore a wedding-ring although as far as anybody knew he was not married. . . . He had a friend who was the youngest judge in the whole country. He was a judge and he had a very sweet smile and he studied the stars. . . . Mr. Reynold's younger brother was always saying it is greed, greed, nothing but greed. His best friend was the widow of a tea-king, and she liked to wander in the rain in wooden shoes and carry an umbrella. . . . The widow of the tea-king had a friend, he was librarian of a legislative assembly. He and his wife had been married many years and had no children and then they had a little girl an unusually pretty one. The father always said nothing. He was a pleasant man and said pleasant things. . . . He knew another librarian of a legislative family and he also had been married for twenty years and they never had had a child and then they had one, a little boy, he was not very good looking, his mother was Swedish and he did not look like her. (PP. 18-20)

Although each character is somehow related to another,

they are presented in a disjointed manner, as in the consistent linking of cliché descriptions with unusual details: "he had a very sweet smile and he studied the stars"; or the mentioning of ordinary actions performed in an eccentric manner: "she liked to wander in the rain in wooden shoes and carry an umbrella"; and the occasional contradictory statement: "The father always said nothing. He was a pleasant man and said pleasant things." Although associated, the characters appear disconnected. They are presented as a fragmented group of units rather than a cohesive society.

The state of disorder is apparent in the confusion of identities throughout the novel. At one point, for example, Mrs. Reynolds is mistaken for her sister-in-law, Hope Reynolds (p. 52); and elsewhere, Stein purposely confuses the title of the novel with its protagonist: "Mrs. Reynolds is not all about roses, it is more about Tuesdays than about roses. Mrs. Reynolds had many kinds of Tuesdays" (p. 2).

This treatment of days of the week as objects is typical of another of her methods. Stein also creates a distorted world through warping the normal sense of time. Not only can the past become the future, as in Mrs. Reynolds' assurance, "do not worry it is not yet yesterday" (p. 119), but the future can also become the past:

> But formerly, Angel Harper had said there is no use in fifty, before being forty-nine, he had thought he had really thought of being fifty before being forty-nine and then he thought again, he said he would be forty-nine and begin again, in other words he thought that being fifty would be really the time of beginning although actually beginning beginning when he was forty-nine. (P. 141)

Instead of being an abstact concept, time is usually treated as a concrete object, as in Mrs. Reynolds' opinion of Thursdays: "Sometimes people wanted to give her a Thursday but she never took it, never noticed they wanted to give it to her. Paid no attention to it, never asked any one to take it away, simply did not notice a Thursday" (p. 3). To emphasize this distortion of time, Stein repeats at various intervals the daily routine of Mrs. Reynolds: "in the morning she could look about and in the afternoon she could see what there was to see and in the evening she could hear what there was to hear and then they would go to bed" (p. 148). Her daily routine is the one constant and unvarying action in Mrs. Reynolds. Its normality, as well as its plain domesticity, acts as a contrast to all the other abnormalities.

Throughout the wanderings of Mrs. Reynolds' mind the war years continue. Yet Stein does not present this process of time as a serial progression. Instead,

one day, month, or year is placed as a self-contained unit next to another day, month, or year. In the words of Randa Dubnick: "as action is suppressed in favor of mental processes, the mental time of perception displaces chronological order." [24] One point in time does not lead into another, nor does a unit of time follow out of another. As Lloyd Frankenberg notes in his Foreword to the novel:

> She [Mrs. Reynolds] is a baby, child, and grown-up. She carries her past and her future about with her: memories and predictions. In the mind these co-exist; they are on the same plane.
>
> In Mrs. Reynolds this plane is not the continuous present. It is written in the past tense. Yet it gives me the impression of being an immediate past, of being a present moment continuously becoming the past. Even the future, when it is thought of, has already gone by. (P. ix)

Stein cannot write a narrative for a narrative is composed of a sequence and a sequence relies on memory. Memory, in turn, has no place in a technique that tries to achieve immediacy, for it is a form of "past thinking." [25] Because writing should not be a "succession but an immediate existing," a novel, according to Stein, should deal in knowledge, or knowing, rather than emotion. Emotion is a distraction to present thinking; knowledge is created by simultaneity (James' "acqaintance") while emotion is created by sequence. [26] As Stein said

in one of her lectures: "A narrative can give emotion because an emotion is dependent upon succession upon a thing having a beginning and a middle and an ending. That is why every one used to like sequels . . . but actually in modern writing sequels have no meaning." [27]

Sutherland describes this mingling of time sense as "a thoroughly intellectual and secular art, essentially, and in the great sense, comic." [28] In confusing the categories of actuality Stein suggests a realm of possibility. Much of her writing, through deriding the old concepts of ordered reality, is dedicated to the creation of a new reality. As one of her detractors has admitted: "Miss Stein's own special brand of comedy is devoted to the problem of discontinuity." [29] For her, the problem of discontinuity takes the form of the disjunction between the act of recording and the act of experiencing. Her method reveals an awareness usually found in comedy that "life is teleological, the rest of nature is, apparently, mechanical." [30] Yet the assumptions embodied in her style suggest a belief that her technique can bridge the gap between the natural and the mechanical.

Like Conrad, Stein is conscious that language orders reality. Her style displays an awareness that language falls short of the modes of existence it is meant to express. According to William James

> We have an organ or faculty to appreciate the simply given order. The real world as it is given objectively at this moment is the sum total of all its being and events now. But can we think of such a sum? . . . While I talk and the flies buzz, a sea gull catches a fish at the mouth of the Amazon, a tree falls in the Adirondack wilderness, a man sneezes in Germany, a horse dies in Tattany and twins are born in France. What does that mean? Does the contemporaneity of these events with one another, and with a million others as disjointed, form a rational bond between them, and unite them into anything that resembles for us a world? 31

Commenting on James' words, Norman Weinstein suggests that for Stein a "linguistic logic based upon laws of direct causality and linear time cannot authentically correspond to a universe of possibilities such as James suggests." [32] Language cannot completely express the entire realm of experience. Instead, it deals with a smaller portion. Yet, similar to Conrad's fear that language has become ossified and hence removed from reality is Stein's belief that the language used to express this smaller realm is "dead dead dead" (p. 153).

Her response, while lecturing at the University of Chicago, to the hapless undergraduate who asked her to explain "rose is a rose is a rose," is revealing:

> "Now listen. Can't you see that when language was new--as it was with Chaucer and Homer--the poet could use the name of a thing and the thing was really there. He could say 'O moon,' 'O sea,' 'O love,' and the moon and the sea and love were really there.

> And can't you see that after hundreds of years had gone by and thousands of poems had been written, he could call on those words and find that they were just wornout literary words. The excitingness of pure being had withdrawn from them; they were just rather stale literary words. Now the poet has to work in the excitingness of pure being; he has to get back that intensity into the language. We all know that it's hard to write poetry in a late age; and we know that you have to put some strangeness, as something unexpected, into the structure of the sentence in order to bring back vitality to the noun. Now it's not enough to be bizarre; the strangeness in the sentence structure has to come from the poetic gift, too. That's why it's doubly hard to be a poet in a late age. Now you all have seen hundreds of poems about roses and you know in your bones that the rose is not there. All those songs that sopranos sing as encores about 'I have a garden! oh, what a garden!' Now I don't want to put too much emphasis on that line, because it's just one line in a longer poem. But I notice that you all know it; you make fun of it but you know it. Now listen! I'm no fool. I know that in daily life we don't go around saying ' . . . is a . . . is a . . . ' Yes, I'm no fool; but I think that in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years." 33

Put quite simply, Stein believes that traditional literary language is useless. One need only read the scraps of such stale language in her own Radcliffe freshman themes to realize how close she had been to such trite and wornout language. Selections reveal that winter is "the hoary tyrant"; her mind would "wander as it listeth": and, complaining about the task of having to write a

daily theme, she writes, "Avaunt thou valeful [sic] spectre." Stein even describes her brother Leo, after he fell in a pond, as "a most forlorn and dripping laddie." [34] Her later writing is both a criticism of such language and an attempt to recover its vitality, the "excitingness of pure being." In Mrs. Reynolds she seeks to close the gap between language and the experience it is meant to represent. In pursuing a radical mimesis, she tries to discover an equivalence between her words and her subjects. [35] In all of her essays and lectures, Stein insists that her writing is an attempt "to get back to the essence of the thing contained within itself." [36]

Her most obvious criticism of language is in her manipulation of words. She often couples words that are visually and aurally similar, as in "cows were cowards" (p. 94), but have no relation in meaning. In an effort to ridicule the notion of fixed meaning itself, Stein frequently offers such gems of wisdom as: "spiders can exaggerate but never months and days" (p. 22). Disconnected from their denotative and connotative meanings, the words follow the fundamental principle of nonsense. Nonsense, according to Auden, violates the rules of language: "It is a law of language that any given verbal sound always means the same thing and only that thing." [37] Instead, the words create a

law of their own.

Closely associated with her method of nonsense is her use of rhymes. As with her manner of linking normal appearances with odd details, Stein chooses words that are incongruous: "It was midnight and Angel Harper fell asleep as he slept he knew he was not through and as he slept he knew he was no Jew and as he slept he knew that he was blue, blue with care and white with hair and afraid at night which was his share. Thank you said Angel Harper who was asleep and he thought it was hoodoo" (p. 74). The effect is "as if the words, on the basis of their auditory friendship, had taken charge of the situation." [38] Because rhymes have an "obsessive internal patterning independent of any relation to reality," [39] Stein's manipulation of words disturbs any comfortable notions about language.

Yet, although Mrs. Reynolds is a comedy of language, there remains a major flaw in the novel, its monotony. As Edmund Wilson remarked of her earlier work, The Making of Americans, "this is queer and very boring." [40] Despite the occasional moment of liveliness, Mrs. Reynolds suffers from an overall quality of stasis. The stasis, however, is not a consciously created feature of the novel, as in The Secret Agent. Instead, it is more of a result of Stein's techniques. In his cranky book, Art By Subtraction, Benjamin Reid criticizes this flatness of her work: "to maintain the 'presentness' of her

creative vision . . . [she] fixed her lens in a static position and photographed reality as a still-life succession." [41] The repetitions, for example, are not regarded by Stein as repetitious. Her aim is to have them represent, or imitate, the mind's constant flux:

> and who was it was it a man or was it
> a woman who was it said to him, either
> it is real or it is not real and if it
> is not real it is not at all real or
> it is real and it is all real you see
> it as real and not real but it is not
> real or not real, it is real, that is
> to say is it, but not the two together
> oh dear no not the two together. (P. 240)

Although the passage is a fair imitation of a character's mind trying to remember something, Stein, because she concentrates on her method alone, is forced to disregard substance. The context of the scene, its relevance, and the importance of remembering it are not revealed. To do so would compel her to accept what she considers truly repetitious, memory. For, although the character's recollection is of a past event, the remembering of it is a present action, and any explanation of the past would destroy the presentness or immediacy of the passage.

Because the continuous present is, in Stein's system, a discrete dimension, it can have no connection with the past:

> No matter how complicated anything is,
> if it is not mixed up with remembering
> there is no confusion, but and that is
> the trouble with a great many so called
> intelligent people they mix up remember-

> ing with talking and listening, and as a result they have theories about anything but as remembering is repetition and confusion, and being existing that is listening and talking is action and not repetition intelligent people although they talk as if they knew something are really confusing, because they are so to speak keeping two times going at once, the repetition time of remembering and the actual time of talking but, and as they are rarely talking and listening, that is talking being listening and listening being talking, although they are clearly saying something they are not clearly creating something, because they are because they always are remembering, they are not at the same time talking and listening. [42]

Stein's idea of a pure present ("being existing") leads her to make some curious assumptions. As her phrase "keeping two times going at once" suggests, she separates the past from the present as two absolute times wholly distinct from one another. Commenting on this problem, Wendy Steiner notes: "it is clear that perception in terms of totally disconnected context-free nows never occurs, or at least we can never know that it occurs, for this would mean that we were perceiving as if we had no accumulated experience and no language." [43] If time is in constant flux, a series of present moments, then the past forms the present and the present forms the future. They are not divisible into absolute states of being.

Because her method is critical of traditional representation but, unfortunately, does not offer a more practicable alternative, her work has been branded as a

"comedy of meaninglessness." [44] Mrs. Reynolds, however, is intelligible, perhaps too much so. In writing about a "perfectly ordinary couple living an ordinary life and having ordinary conversations," Stein writes in a style of imitative language. Mrs. Reynolds is written in very ordinary words; they are common, simple, and usually monosyllabic. Yet, because she does not allow any associations in her words, her simple language is, for example, very unlike that of Hardy's. It rapidly becomes tired, flat, and enfeebled. [45] Stein also avoids such complexities as metaphor. Because of her concern with an exactitude of representation, "she does not try to create 'figures of speech'." [46] Yet, in avoiding such stale metaphors as "winter the hoary tyrant," Stein tends toward the other extreme. As David Lodge puts it, "her treatment is so drastic that it kills the patient." [47]

Reid believes her "attempt to revitalize the art of writing reduced itself to a destruction of all the accumulated resources of the art." [48] Although her method is definitely not destructive, her strict adherence to precise representation does make for a rather desiccated language. Stein does not consider that words are never wholly free of context. In Mrs. Reynolds the result is frequently an unfortunate sterility of style. She writes in what William Gass,

in a discussion of her early work, has described as protective language:

> One way in writing of not coming near an object is to interpose a kind of neutralizing middle tongue, one that is neither abstractly and impersonally scientific nor directly confronting and dramatic, but one that lies in the gray limbo in between, composed of the commonest words because its objects are the objects of everyday, and therefore a language that is simple and unspecialized, yet one whose effect is flat and sterilizing because its words are held to the simplest naming nouns and verbs, connectives, prepositions, articles, and pronouns, the tritest adjectives of value, a few adverbs of quantity and degree, and the automatic flourishes of social speech--good day, how do you do, so pleased. This desire to gain by artifice a safety from the world--to find a way of thinking without the risks of feeling--is the source of the impulse to abstractness and simplicity in Gertrude Stein as it is in much of modern painting, where she felt immediately the similarity of aim.
>
> Protective language names, it never renders. . . . Protective language, then, must be precise, for in a world of dangerous objects which by craft of language have been circumvented, there remains a quantity of unfastened feeling that, in lighting elsewhere, will turn a harmless trifle into a symbol. Name a rose and you suggest romance, love, civil war, the maidenhead. The English language is so rich in its associations that its literature tends to be complex and carry its meanings on at many levels. . . . Protective language must cut off meanings, not take them on. It must find contexts that will limit the functions of its words to that of naming. Gertrude Stein set about discovering such contexts. 49

Instead of bringing her language into a close relation with reality, to an exact resemblance, Stein's language, as Gass implies, tends to be cut off from reality. It names but rarely renders.

In support of his contention that Stein's attempt to revivify language is, in practice, an emptying of it, Reid compares her to other modern writers: "Our language is not the abject vessel Gertrude Stein found it to be. The real innovators--Joyce, Proust, Kafka, Hopkins, Virginia Woolf--all are constantly making the language perform new acrobatics of color, nuance, and intelligibility by sensitively exploiting with new virtuosity its ancient resources." [50] Although one wonders how the works of Proust and Kafka could have been written in "our language," Reid's claim can be substantiated if Mrs. Reynolds is compared to Woolf's Mrs Dalloway, a novel that Mrs. Reynolds resembles in some ways:

> "That is all," she said, looking at the fishmonger's. "That is all," she repeated, pausing for a moment at the window of a glove shop where, before the War, you could buy almost perfect gloves. And her old Uncle William used to say a lady is known by her shoes and her gloves. He had turned on his bed one morning in the middle of the War. He had said, "I have had enough." Gloves and shoes; she had a passion for gloves; but her own daughter, her Elizabeth, cared not a straw for either of them.
>
> Not a straw, she thought, going on up Bond Street to a shop where they

> kept flowers for her when she gave a party. Elizabeth really cared for her dog most of all. The whole house this morning smelt of tar. Still, better poor Grizzle than Miss Kilman; better distemper and tar and all the rest of it than sitting mewed in a stuffy bedroom with a prayer book! 51

Woolf presents Clarissa Dalloway performing a very ordinary and commonplace task, the morning shopping. Like Mrs. Reynolds', her thoughts are seemingly disconnected in their movement by association: gloves lead to war, then to Uncle William, his death during the war, and then back to gloves and shoes. The language, too, is fairly ordinary ("not a straw") and the thoughts are rather banal ("shoes and gloves; she had a passion for gloves"). The passage is also an example of Woolf's complex method of characterization. The subtle manner in which Clarissa's mind continually returns to thoughts of her daughter, sickness, old age, and death reveals her anxieties. Yet, although similar in some ways to Stein's, Woolf's presentation, in its complicated intermingling of Clarissa's thoughts, memories, worries, and perceptions, is far more sophisticated, and interesting, than Stein's.

The lack of designated relevance in Mrs. Reynolds is indicative of another problem with the novel. Stein's method of presentation does not allow her to differentiate between the important and the trivial. Every-

thing in Mrs. Reynolds is treated as equally relevant. As Stein said , "either everything is worth writing about or nothing is worth writing about." [52] Sutherland, in defense of this idea, writes:

> All the little things that in a longer perspective of time look trivial and transient and so negligible suddenly become as real as the president of the republic or original sin or the Rock of Gibraltar, and it is quite as delightful and urgent to the mind to define these little things, any group of them given together, as to articulate a political or a theological or an imperial system. [53]

It is difficult to disagree with Sutherland's words. In fact, they suggest a reiteration of the belief that a general truth can be found in particular things. As Mrs Dalloway shows, the trivial and quotidian can be very revealing. Stein, however, equates worth with importance. The assumption that everything is momentous tends to make everything insignificant:

> Some one perhaps it was a cousin told Mrs. Reynolds about two sisters they were daughters of a farmer and they had both had children, that is to say the oldest had a baby in secret and the younger sister helped her to kill it, yes kill it, and then the younger sister had a baby in secret and the older sister helped her younger sister to kill it. And then somebody found it out and the police came and they took both of the sisters to prison and the oldest began to cry and tell everything and the younger did not cry but she told everything and when everything had been told she said and now you know everything let us go home so we can milk the cows

> cows have to be milked and she could not see why they did not let her. Cows have to be milked when milking time comes. (P. 114)

Instead of making the trivial important, as Sutherland believes, Stein makes the important trivial. Infanticide is equated with the milking of cows.

This equal treatment might be a comic distortion of values. Yet comedy relies on a hierarchy of values, the tacit agreement that one thing is of more importance than another. Stein's inability to discriminate, however, prevents the establishment of such a hierarchy. Therefore the sisters, the murders, and the cows are of necessity treated equally. They are objects rather than subjects. The problem, therefore, is a question of degree. Mrs. Reynolds exemplifies the problem raised by Lukacs; with the exception of the comfortable domestic routines of Mrs. Reynolds, the concept of the normal is almost entirely absent from the novel. [54] As Gerald L. Bruns, in a discussion of diffusion as a principle of composition, remarks: "Words fly apart at the very center of speech, for there is no stable and enduring center around which they may be organized." [55]

Instead of differentiating, Stein describes. She held that "description is explanation." [56] Her description, however, tends to be a mere enumeration of data. In trying to justify Stein's statement, Allegra Stewart

has written: "Gertrude Stein's real concern, however, is not to explain the world, but to describe or inspire the act of presence by means of which the human mind and cosmic beauty are realized." [57] Stewart's implied comparison is unfair; no writer, with the possible exception of Milton, has ever set out "to explain the world." Practising a form of radical mimesis, Stein tries to describe everything and the reader, in turn, is supposed to discover significance through each renewed effort of mimetic participation. Stein shares an assumption with the Naturalists that "an artist can recapture a sense of reality by mere force of accumulation." [58] Yet, in Mrs. Reynolds, mere accumulation of description results in monotony and the reader's mimetic participation, no matter how patient, becomes wearisome.

Susan Sontag once described Gertrude Stein as "one of those oppressively memorable geniuses of the artistic dead end." [59] Although Mrs. Reynolds might not be wholly satisfactory, Stein's methods are instructive. As David Lodge sees it, the "interest and value" of her work "is largely theoretical rather than particular and concrete." [60] Her writing is a testing ground for many assumptions about language. Can language ever mirror reality? To what degree can a subjective reality be not only portrayed but communicated? And

finally, is the confined consciousness of a perceiver ever knowable? [61] In Mrs. Reynolds, Stein shows how far a radically mimetic treatment of a disordered condition might go.

Notes

[1] Gertrude Stein, Picasso (London: B. T. Batsford, 1938), p. 49.

[2] Jacob Korg, Language in Modern Literature: Innovation and Experiment (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979), p. 4.

[3] Stein, Narration: Four Lectures (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), p. 17.

[4] Patricia Meyerowitz (ed.), "Plays," Gertrude Stein: Writings and Lectures (London: Peter Owen, 1967), p. 65.

[5] William James, The Principles of Psychology (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), p. 296.

[6] Donald Sutherland, Gertrude Stein: A Biography of Her Work (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), p. 7.

[7] Stein, "Composition as Explanation," Writings and Lectures, p. 25.

[8] Sutherland, p. 86.

[9] Warner Berthoff, The Ferment of Realism: American Literature, 1884-1919 (New York: The Free Press, 1965), pp. 33, 41.

[10] Korg, p.42.

[11] Stein, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 228.

[12] Korg, p. 43.

[13] Wendy Steiner, Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein (New Haven and London: Yale University Press,

1978), p. 31.

[14] Stein, The Geographical History of America (New York: Random House, 1936), p. 74.

[15] Narration, p. 20.

[16] Stein, "How Writing Is Written," in How Writing Is Written, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Swallow Press, 1974), pp. 155-56.

[17] Sutherland, p. 59.

[18] Wendy Steiner, p. 22.

[19] Allegra Stewart, Gertrude Stein and the Present (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 25.

[20] Sutherland, p. 138 n5. Michael Hoffman, in his Gertrude Stein (Boston: Twayne, 1976), believes "Mrs. Reynolds is her finest [novel] since The Making of Americans" (p. 102); and Cynthia Secor, in "The Question of Gertrude Stein," American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism, ed. Fritz Fleischmann (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), describes the novel as "a tour de force" and one of "the most significant of her long prose narratives" (p. 307).

[21] Stein, Mrs. Reynolds, in Mrs. Reynolds and Five Earlier Novelettes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), pp. 203-04. All future references to this work will be given parenthetically within the text.

[22] Nathalie Sarraute, The Age of Suspicion, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Braziller, 1963), pp. 53-54. Cited by Randa Dubnick, The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language, and Cubism (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), p. 118.

[23] "Gertrude Stein in France," Vogue, 1 July 1942, 70.

[24] Dubnick, p. 76.

[25] A major idea throughout her expository writing and lectures; most fully expressed in "Portraits and Repetition," Writings and Lectures, pp. 99-122.

[26] Wendy Steiner, p. 182.

[27] Narration, p. 22.

[28] Sutherland, p. 22.

[29] Feibleman, p. 237.

[30] Susanne Langer, "The Comic Rhythm," in Corrigan, pp. 120-21.

[31] From a lecture given 1881; quoted by Norman Weinstein, Gertrude Stein and the Literature of the Modern Consciousness (New York: Unger, 1970), p. 5.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Quoted by Thornton Wilder in his Introduction to Four in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), pp. v-vi.

[34] Collected in Rosalind Miller's Gertrude Stein: Form and Intelligibility (New York: Exposition Press, 1949). Selections are made by Richard Bridgman, Gertrude Stein in Pieces (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 5.

[35] Wendy Steiner, p. 54.

[36] "Portraits and Repetition," p. 117.

[37] W. H. Auden, "Notes on the Comic," in Corrigan, p. 67.

[38] Ibid., p. 68.

[39] Wendy Steiner, p. 180.

[40] Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle (New York and London: Scribner's, 1931), p. 241.

[41] Herbert Reid, Art by Subtraction (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), pp. 205-06.

[42] "Portraits and Repetition," p. 106.

[43] Wendy Steiner, p. 52.

[44] Feibleman, p. 240.

[45] Korg, p. 43.

[46] Stewart, p. 59 n13.

[47] David Lodge, The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 154.

[48] Reid, p. 196.

[49] William H. Gass, "Gertrude Stein: Her Escape from Protective Language," in his Fiction and the Figures of Life (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), pp. 89-90. Gass, however, thinks that this language is found only in such early works as Three Lives and The Making of Americans as well as some of the early experiments.

[50] Reid, p. 199.

[51] Virginia Woolf, Mrs Dalloway (Frogmore, St. Albans: Triad / Panther, 1976), p. 12.

[52] "Portraits and Repetition," p. 183.

[53] Sutherland, p. 88.

[54] Secor, however, believes that "she begins Mrs. Reynolds with a set of details, the 'descriptive

residue,' that establishes the conventional world of the novel for the reader, just before Stein departs it for the uncharted ground of the 'new novel' she is writing" (pp. 302-03).

[55] Gerald L. Bruns, Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 176.

[56] "Plays," p. 86.

[57] Stewart, p. 64.

[58] George Steiner, p. 332.

[59] Susan Sontag, "The Salmagundi Interview," A Susan Sontag Reader (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1982), p. 334.

[60] Lodge, p. 145.

[61] Wendy Steiner, p. 26.

Chapter Four

Samuel Beckett: Watt and the Dianoetic Laugh

Samuel Beckett is reported to have said that "if there were only darkness, all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable." [1] If meaninglessness, for example, were all that existed, our situation would be intelligible. It would be a fixed ground or pole against which things could be discerned and judged. Yet, if meaninglessness is not absolute, neither is meaning. Both darkness and light, or the concepts of order and disorder, are present in Beckett's fiction. Disorder, as Beckett told Tom Driver, is equal to, and mutually distinct, from order: "What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form [as an ordering principle] in art. It only means that there will be new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former." [2]

In Watt, described by Hugh Kenner as a "raid of syntax upon chaos," [3] Beckett presents his hero as a lover of order, a rationalist who, when confronted with

phenomenon, tries to define it, ascertain its cause and effect, and impose meaning on it. Watt is, in many ways, a forebear of Clov in Endgame who at one point remarks: "I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust." [4] Yet Watt, when he is confronted with the nothingness of Mr. Knott's household, the chaos of meaninglessness, tries in vain to order this nothingness. The more Watt attempts to understand that which is incomprehensible, the more he tries to isolate it. In so doing, he endeavors to contain his experiences in a stable and ordered self-created verbal universe. [5] His goal, however, is impossible. Thus Watt's rationalism becomes so extreme that it borders on the irrational.

The opening scene of the novel suggests the familiar and normal world which Watt must leave:

> Mr. Hackett turned the corner and saw, in the failing light, at some little distance, his seat. It seemed to be occupied. This seat, the property very likely of the municipality, or of the public, was of course not his, but he thought of it as his. This was Mr. Hackett's attitude towards things that pleased him. He knew they were not his, but he thought of them as his. He knew they were not his, because they pleased him. 6

A sense of order is established through the authoritative tone of the apparently omniscient third person narrator. Order is also present in Mr. Hackett's habits. Habit, as

Beckett explained in Proust, offers stability; something is presumed to be stable only because it was so yesterday and, most likely, will be the same tomorrow. [7]

Yet here this sense of the normal is already uneasy:

> Mr. Hackett thought she was going to pat him on the head, or at least stroke his hunch. He called in his arms and they sat down beside him, the lady on one side, and the gentleman on the other. As a result of this, Mr. Hackett found himself between them. His head reached to the armpits. Their hands met above the hunch, on the backboard. They drooped with tenderness towards him. (P. 10)

The meticulous objective details reveal the normal to be slightly abnormal. The action of Mr. Hackett calling in his arms suggests that they have an intelligence, if not will, of their own. Also unsettling is the narrator's excess of logic: Tetty Nixon sits on one side of Mr. Hackett and Goff on the other and, "as a result of this," the reader is solemnly informed, "Mr. Hackett found himself between them."

This subtle shift from the stable and familiar into the absurd is also present in their dialogue. The Nixons and Mr. Hackett discuss that most normal of conversation topics, the weather:

> These northwestern skies are really extraordinary, said Goff, are they not.
> So voluptuous, said Tetty. You think it is all over and then pop! up they flare, with augmented radiance.

> Yes, said Mr. Hackett, there are protuberances and protuberances.
> Poor Mr. Hackett, said Tetty, poor dear Mr. Hackett.
> Yes, said Mr. Hackett. (P. 15)

Dialogue establishes stability; it "always presupposes a shared world and communicable assumptions." [8] Yet, because Beckett's use of the non sequitur conveys "the alogical absurdity of the cosmos," [9] their conversation is more of a non-conversation. Their communication of a shared reality slips into a reflection of the absurd.

Watt also experiences a shift from the familiar and normal into the strange and abnormal. At Mr. Knott's house, Watt's predecessor, Arsene, describes this process as the movement from harmony into discord:

> He is well pleased. For he knows he is in the right place, at last. And he knows he is the right man, at last. . . . The sensations, the premonitions of harmony are irrefragable, of imminent harmony, when all outside him will be he, the flowers the flowers that he is among him, the sky the sky that he is above him, the earth trodden the earth treading, and all sound his echo. (PP. 40-41)

Everything has a definite identity and Watt will be in a stable relationship with the external world. Harmony and security will be his two predominant feelings. [10] Yet something, Arsene warns, will slip:

> Where was I? The change. In what did it consist? It is hard to say. Something slipped. There I was, warm and bright, smoking my tobacco-pipe, watching the warm bright wall, when

> suddenly somewhere some little thing slipped, some little tiny thing. . . . I did not, need I add, see the thing happen, nor hear it, but I perceived it . . . But in what did the change consist? What was changed, and how? What was changed, if my information is correct, was the sentiment that a change, other than a change of degree, had taken place. What was changed was existence off the ladder. Do not come down the ladder, Ifor, I haf taken it away. This I am happy to inform you is the reversed metamorphosis. The laurel into Daphne. The old thing, where it always was, back again. (PP. 40-44)

As Arsene explains it, a split will occur between Watt and his world. All of Watt's methods of ordering will be useless when confronted with "the old thing," the void of nothingness.

Order, and the comfort that it offers, please Watt. When he encounters Mr. Spiro, he finds his manner of direct introduction appealing:

> My name is Spiro, said the gentleman.
> Here then was a sensible man at last. He began with the essential and then, working on, would deal with the less important matters, one after the other, in an orderly way.
> Watt smiled. (P. 27)

Watt, it should be noted, rarely smiles. He is extremely pleased not so much by Spiro himself (for Watt soon loses interest in him and instead listens to the voices in his head), but with Spiro's organized manner of speech.

On arriving at Mr. Knott's house, Watt finds the

front and back doors locked. Using the most basic and methodical of solutions, he merely shuttles between the two doors until one is finally open: "Finding the back door locked also, Watt returned to the front door. Finding the front door locked still, Watt returned to the back door. Finding the back door now open . . . Watt was able to enter the house" (p. 36). Watt, of course, is troubled by this and, using his "science of the locked door" (p. 36), arrives at two explanations: either the back door was always unlocked or someone had unlocked it. He prefers the second explanation not because it is more probable but because it is "the more beautiful" (p. 37). It is the structure of the solution rather than the solution itself that appeals to Watt.

This need for a surface logic, an explanation or solution that looks right, is thwarted with the arrival of the Galls, father and son, to tune the piano. It is, the narrator states, "the principal incident of Watt's early days in Mr. Knott's house" (p. 72); an event during which Watt experiences the slip that Arsene had foretold. Having entered the room, Watt overhears the Galls' conversation:

> The mice have returned, he said.
> The elder said nothing. Watt wondered if he had heard.

> Nine dampers remain, said the younger, and an equal number of hammers.
> Not corresponding, I hope, said the elder.
> In one case, said the younger.
> The elder had said nothing to this.
> The strings are in flitters, said the younger.
> The elder had nothing to say to this either.
> The piano is doomed, in my opinion, said the younger.
> The piano-tuner also, said the elder.
> The pianist also, said the younger. (P. 72)

Perplexed by their cryptic conversation, Watt tries to find some meaning in it: "This fragility of the outer meaning had a bad effect on Watt, for it caused him to seek for another" (p. 73). Yet Watt can make nothing of it:

> So Watt did not know what had happened. He did not care, to do him justice, what had happened. But he felt the need to think that such and such a thing had happened . . . [Watt] was obliged, because of his peculiar character, to enquire into what they meant, oh not into what they really meant, his character was not so peculiar as all that, but into what they might be induced to mean, with the help of a little patience, a little ingenuity. (PP. 74-75)

Unable to impose any form of meaning onto the incident, Watt is distressed by the perceived meaninglessness. Unable to accept that "Nothing had happened" (p. 76), he can only comprehend "nothing" as "something": "For the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something" (p. 77). If Watt could

speak of nothing as something, then the incident would no longer trouble him. It would be contained in a verbal construction.

For Watt, "to explain had always been to exorcize" (p. 78). He believes that words are the same as the objects to which they are applied, that there is no difference between the signifier and the signified. For example, an analogy is in his inability to distinguish between the colloquial and literal meaning of a word: "For if Erskine's room had always been locked, and the key always in Erskine's pocket, then Erskine himself, for all his agility, would have been hard set to glide in and out of his room" (p. 124). Watt accepts everything at face value. Yet, after the Galls episode, Watt can no longer look at a pot, for instance, and "say Pot, pot, and be comforted" (p. 81). Things cannot be named in Mr. Knott's household; nothing can describe nothing:

> But he desired words to be applied to his situation, to Mr. Knott, to the house, to the grounds, to his duties, to the stairs, to his bedroom, to the kitchen, and in a general way to the conditions of being in which he found himself. For Watt now found himself in the midst of things which, if they consented to be named, did so as it were with reluctance. (P. 81)

Insisting that nothing must be something and therefore can be named and yet unable to do so, Watt desires to

hear Erskine's voice "wrapping up safe in words the kitchen space, the extraordinary newel-lamp, the stairs . . . it would have shown that at least for Erskine the pot was a pot" (pp. 83-84). Erskine, however, never speaks (p. 85).

When confronted with the infinity of nothingness, Watt can only approach it in terms of the finite. While pondering the arrangements of Mr. Knott's meals, Watt comes up with twelve possibilities, culminating in the statement: "Other possibilities occurred to Watt, in this connexion, but he put them aside, and quite out of his mind, as unworthy of serious consideration, for the time being" (p. 90). Watt's attempts at containing the nothingness are futile for, as Richard Coe notes, nothing multiplied by something, still equals nothing.[11]

Watt employs the serial principle in trying to resolve the "little matter" (p. 111) of the dog who eats Mr. Knott's leftover food:

> But once Watt had grasped, in its complexities, the mecanism of this arrangement, how the food came to be left, and the dog to be available, and the two to be united, then it interested him no more, and he enjoyed a comparative peace of mind, in this connexion. Not that for a moment Watt supposed that he had penetrated the forces at play, in this particular instance, or even

> perceived the forms that they upheaved, or obtained the least useful information concerning himself, or Mr. Knott, for he did not. But he had turned, little by little, a disturbance into words, he had made a pillow of old words, for a head. Little by little, and not without labour. (P. 117)

What satisfies Watt is the structure of the serial solution rather than its terms. The serial method is strictly ordered, rational and, above all, allows for predictability. "A series," according to Jacqueline Hoefer, "is a succession of terms which proceed according to a fixed rule; any term at any point in the series can be predicted by the rule which determines the progression. By using either the series or the logical possibilities, one may situate single events or combinations within a limited known framework." [12] Thus Watt is able to impose limits on the infinite and the serial principle is, not surprisingly, one of his most common methods of ordering.

That the serial method is another means of containing the problem rather than solving it is also apparent in Watt's tabulation:

Solution	Number of Objections
1st	2
2nd	3
3rd	4
4th	5

Number of Solutions	Number of Objections
4	14
3	9
2	5
1	2 (PP. 97-98)

Although the tabulations look informative, they reveal very little. The first, although it lists the number of objections, says nothing about their nature. The second states the problem mathematically but nothing more. As Hoefer notes: "To calculate that four solutions contain a total of fourteen objections, or that three solutions contain a total of nine objections, does not help us with the fourth solution or the third solution." [13] Watt clings to such formulations, not to establish an absolute truth but to achieve "semantic succour" (p. 83).

This unbridgable gap between the orderly logic of Watt's methodology and the chaos represented by Mr. Knott's household is represented in Arthur's tale of Ernest Louit (the author of The Mathematical Intuitions of the Visicelts) and Nackybal. Nackybal has the ability to compute in his head the cube of any number from one to ninety-nine, and to extract the cube root of any perfect cube of six digits or less. [14] When one of the committee members, Mr. O'Meldon, asks for the cube root of five hundred and nineteen thousand three hundred and thirteen (p. 190), Nackybal has no answer. As it

turns out, 519,313 is a surd, an irrational number with no cube root. Nackybal, Arthur later reveals, has merely memorized the cubes of one to nine and thus O'Meldon's number, even if it were a rational one, is beyond his limits.

Nackybal's memorization of a list of numbers is a methodical system analogous to Watt's. Both are useless when confronted with the irrational. Watt's logic presupposes an inherently rational and finite world where nothing can be arbitrary in a closed series of cause and effect. Watt's methods fail, however, because they are inconsistent with the phenomena they are meant to control:

> Logic depends upon systematic application of the process of elimination in a field of limited possibilities. In Watt, Beckett preserves the system, but places it in a field of unlimited possibilities in which all alternatives are equally available. The limitations of common sense and probability are themselves eliminated . . . The structures of logic become useless in an absurd world but, nonetheless, the structures are jealously maintained. 15

Nackybal's list of cube roots is insufficient when confronted with a surd; Watt's logic is useless when faced with the limitless.

This attempt to limit the limitless, to impose the rational on the irrational, leads inevitably to the absurd. In presenting the permutations of Watt's logic,

Beckett presents the coexistence of two states: order and disorder, or darkness and light. [16] In trying to contain the myriad logical possibilities, Beckett's sane, objective and rational language slowly moves toward the irrational:

> For though as a general rule Mr. Knott ate every atom both of his lunch and of his dinner, in which case the dog got nothing, yet what was to prevent him from eating every atom of his lunch, but no dinner, or only part of his dinner, in which case the dog got the uneaten dinner, or portion of dinner, or from eating no lunch, or only part or only part of his lunch, and yet every atom of his dinner, in which case the dog got the uneaten lunch, or portion of lunch, or from eating only part of his lunch, and then again only part of his dinner, in which case the dog benefited by the two uneaten portions, or from not touching either his lunch or his dinner, in which case the dog, if it neither delayed nor precipitated his arrival, went away with its belly full at last. (PP. 92-93)

Such language is the language of the absurd. In Watt, writes Fred Miller Robinson, "sense dissolves into nonsense; nonsense is expressed sensically." [17] Watt's logic pushes language to the illogical.

His logic, instead of illuminating reality, ultimately denies it. The flux of experience, the infinity of the universe, is rendered at one point in a two-dimensional scheme. Watt, "in search of rest,"

remembers a distant summer night when he lay in the ditch and listened to "three frogs croaking Krak! Krek! Krik! at one, nine, seventeen, twenty-five, etc., and at one, six, eleven, sixteen, etc., and at one, four, seven, ten, etc., respectively" (p. 136). Watt, however, cannot find solace in this precise enumeration of intervals. He must visually represent them in a croak chart:

```
Krak!  -----  -----  -----  -----  -----  -----  -----
Krek!  -----  -----  -----  -----  Krek!  -----  -----
Krik!  -----  -----  Krik!  -----  -----  Krik!  -----

Krak!  -----  -----  -----  -----  -----  -----  -----
-----  -----  Krek!  -----  -----  -----  -----  Krek!
-----  Krik!  -----  -----  Krik!  -----  -----  Krik!

Krak!  -----  -----  -----  -----  -----  -----  -----
-----  -----  -----  -----  Krek!  -----  -----  -----
-----  -----  Krik!  -----  -----  Krik!  -----  ----- (P. 137)
```

The chart carries on for another page. According to Jerry Wasserman, Watt is here not attempting to represent the sounds by means of these constructions. He is not using them "for significative or representational purposes, since language used to name a contingent reality must also be contingent."[18] It is the noncontingent quality of the chart that satisfies Watt. As with his series, the croaks are fixed in a finite and precise relation with one another. Watt renders them with a consistency not found in experience,and thus, by emptying the sounds of any disconcerting inconsistencies, he can contain

his experience. As Wasserman notes:

> Lacking human content and "meaning" of any kind, the sounds can be translated into an objective verbal pattern that is not subject to the fallibilities of consciousness or the deviations of existent reality. The homogeneity of print, which presents to the eye of the reader every Krak! every Krek! every Krik!, and every interval exactly like every other, reinforces the sense of a concrete, invariable structure and denies even the subtle differences of sound or interval Watt might have experienced between the individual croaks of any one frog. Only by using his own words in this manner in his catalogues, without signification or "meaning" in any traditional sense, does Watt momentarily escape the contingency and inevitable failure of his verbal conceptions and create the ground that might be, for his figure, home. 19

Such solace, however, is short lived. Although Watt can create a ground that is familiar, he remains a stranger in Mr. Knott's household.

In labouring "at the ancient labour" (p. 136), in trying to contain the chaos of experience, Watt tries "to speak of the little world of Mr. Knott's establishment, with the old words, the old credentials" (pp. 84-85). Watt's experience, however, "become[s] unspeakable" (p. 85) for Mr. Knott's household, like the Galls incident, is representative of nothing. Arsene describes the common experience in Mr. Knott's house:

> And all the sounds, meaning nothing.
> Then at night rest in the quiet

> house, there are no roads, no streets anymore, you lie down by a window opening on refuge, the little sounds come that demand nothing, ordain nothing, explain nothing, propound nothing, and the short necessary night is soon ended, and the sky blue again over all the secret places never the same, but always simple and indifferent, always mere places, sites of a stirring beyond coming and going, of a being so light and free that it is as the being of nothing. (P. 39)

Watt's experience in the house of Mr. Knott will be of the being of nothing.

Although Watt "learned towards the end of his stay in Mr. Knott's house to accept that nothing had happened," he learned, says the narrator, "too late" (p. 80). As Mr. Knott's name implies, he is a knot, a riddle or an enigma. Mr. Knott's physical appearance constantly changes (p. 147) and his clothing is also "very various, very very various": "Now heavy, now light; now smart, now dowdy; now sober, now gaudy; now decent, now daring (his skirtless bathing-costume, for example)" (p. 200). Like his clothing, his furniture also constantly changes:

> This solid and tasteful furniture was subjected by Mr. Knott to frequent changes of position, both absolute and relative. Thus it was not rare to find, on the Sunday, the tallboy on its feet by the fire . . . and on a Monday, the tallboy on its back by the bed.(P. 205)

Mr. Knott, himself, by moving "in nightly displacements of almost one minute" (p. 207), completes an annual

revolution in his bed. Yet all of Watt's obsevations of Mr. Knott, his habits, and his house are merely surface details.[20] Watt learns about some of Mr. Knott's physical appearances but never manages to elucidate the mystery. As he says to himself: "But what do I know of Mr. Knott? Nothing. And what to me may seem most unlike him, and what to me may seem most like him, may in reality be most like him and most unlike him, for all I can tell" (p. 119).

If the mystery of Mr. Knott's appearances and surroundings is impenetrable, so too is his voice:

> Watt had never heard Mr. Knott either, heard him speak, that is to say, or laugh, or cry. But once he thought he heard him say Tweet! Tweet! to a little bird, and once he heard him make a strange noise, PLOPF PLOPF Plopf Plopf plopf plopf plop plo pl. (P. 147)

Mr. Knott also talks to himself in "a wild dim chatter" that is meaningless to Watt: "solitary dactylic ejaculations of extraordinary vigour, accompanied by spasms of the members. The chief of these were: Exelmans! Cavendish! Habbakuk! Ecchymose!" (p. 209).

Watt finally reaches two conclusions regarding Mr. Knott. The first is that Mr. Knott needs nothing and the second is that he needs to be witnessed:

> And Mr. Knott, needing nothing if not, one, not to need, and, two, a witness to his not needing, of himself knew nothing. And so he

> needed to be witnessed. Not that he might know, no, but that he might not cease. (PP. 202-02)

Like his establishment, to which nothing can be added and nothing taken away (p. 131), Mr. Knott needs nothing. Yet, as nothing, as the nought suggested in his name, he needs to be witnessed in order to exist. For how is nothing known to exist unless it is looked for?

But how does one witness nothing? How can nothing be seen? These are a few of the many questions implied by Watt's name. In fact, in the manuscripts of Watt, described by Richard L. Admussen as "the most fascinating of the Beckett mss" because of "their chaos and exuberance" (they are full of doodles, calculations, anagrams, and musical notations, as well as notes on George III, Shelley's wives, and the popes of Avignon), the original opening line of the novel is "Who, what, where, by what means, why, in what way, when." [21] Such questions occur throughout the novel to such an extent that Watt reads as if it were written in the interrogative mood. Watt's questions, however, are futile in the face of nothingness. [22] Thus the "not" also present in Mr. Knott's name is the negation of all of Watt's attempts at logical solutions.

When confronted with nothing, Watt's sense of self is shattered. After the Galls episode, Watt

"made the distressing discovery that of himself too he could no longer affirm anything that did not seem as false as if he had affirmed it of a stone" (p. 82). The nothingness of Mr. Knott's household destroys the distinctions between subject and object. As Eric Levy describes it: "No objects seen in or from Mr. Knott's house will 'appear in their ancient guise,' for the very principle of appearance --the relation of an object to a finite subject--has disappeared in the general welter of nothing happened." [23] So Watt, not certain of his identity, decides to act as if he were a man:

> So he continued to think of himself as a man, as his mother had taught him, when she said, There's a good little man, or, There's a bonny little man, or, There's a clever little man. But for all the relief that this afforded him, he might just as well have thought of himself as a box, or an urn. (P. 83)

Watt therefore yearns to hear Erskine speak not only of the pot but also to him for, although Watt is no longer sure of himself, it "would have shown that at least for Erskine the pot was a pot, and Watt a man" (p. 84). Like Mr. Knott, Watt also needs to be witnessed.

This dislocation of the subject from the object is represented in the painting Watt looks at in Erskine's room. After pondering the significance of the painting, Watt is moved to tears:

> The only other object of note in Erskine's room was a picture, hanging on the wall, from a nail. A circle, obviously described by a compass, and broken at its lowest point, occupied the middle foreground of this picture. Was it receding? Watt had that impression. In the eastern background appeared a point, or dot. . . . How the effect of perspective was obtained, Watt did not know. . . . Watt wondered how long it would be before the point and circle entered together upon the same plane. Or had they not done so already, or almost? And was it not rather the circle that was in the background, and the point that was in the foreground? (PP. 128-29)

Although the picture is capable of various interpretations,[24] the most persuasive is Olga Bernal's. Using examples taken from history, Bernal argues that the relation between a circle and its centre represents the relation of a subject to its object. In Erskine's painting, however, the circle is broken and the centre dislocated:

> Or, si le centre est une métaphore spatiale du sujet, le dessin qui trouble Watt si profondément et fait couler ses larmes est la représentation d'un décentrement irrémédiable du sujet. Ce qui fait pleurer Watt, c'est la conclusion à laquelle il lui fallait arriver qu'il s'agissait d'un cercle et d'un centre entre lesquels il n'y avait pas de relations, le centre n'appartenant pas au cercle et le cercle n'appartenant pas au centre. Le veille image du centre et du cercle est ici détruite et cette destruction est, en fait, une mise en doute de l'histoire des rapports entre le sujet et l'objet. 25

In the Middle Ages, argues Bernal, God was the centre of the circle; in the Renaissance, it was man as in, for

example, Leonardo's famous drawing of Vitruvian man. But in Watt man has lost that position. His lost position, however, is not replaced with something else for there is no centre.

Hence Watt's futile logic; he assumes that the universe is, like the unbroken circle with a fixed centre, finite and rational. Yet, when faced with the irrational, he breaks down. Watt gradually loses his senses, the tools of perception necessary for empirical observation, and becomes not only deaf, dumb, numb, and blind (p. 164) but becomes not asleep, not awake, not dead, not alive, not spirit, not body, and not Knott, not Watt (p. 167). Watt enters Mr. Knott's void of nothingness where everything is negated. This shattering of Watt is revealed in his insane language which successively inverts itself until finally, while walking backwards, Watt says:

> Dis yb dis, nem owt. Yad la, tin fo trap. Skin, skin, skin. Od su did ned taw? On. Taw ot klat tonk? On. Tonk ot klat taw? On. Tonk ta kool taw? On. Taw ta kool tonk? Nilb, mun, mud. Tin fo trap, yad la. Nem owt, did yb dis. (P. 168)

Watt's inverted language, however, is still strictly logical. Although it appears chaotic it is, according to Ruby Cohn, nevertheless systematic: "Watt's anti-language is a rational and systematic construction.

Even in his madness, he is unable to give up that reason and that language which failed him, and it is not difficult to rearrange the anagrams into English." [26] His language is therefore not a reflection of a complete collapse into chaos. In writing nonsense rather than gibberish, Beckett presents Watt's language as a deviation from order. As with the narrative language, there is the coexistence of two states: of order and of disorder.

After leaving Knott's household, Watt enters a lunatic asylum where he meets the narrator of Watt, Sam. The question, of course, is whether one madman can tell another his story and whether the second lunatic can, in turn, relate it in a coherent fashion:

> But apart from this, it is difficult for a man like Watt to tell a story like Watt's without leaving out some things, and foisting in others. And this does not mean either that I may not have left out some of the things that Watt told me, or foisted in others that Watt never told me, though I was most careful to note down all at the time, in my little notebook. It is so difficult with a long story like the story that Watt told, even when one is most careful to note down all at the time, in one's little notebook, not to leave out some of the things that were told, and not to foist in others that were never told, never never told at all. (P. 126)

The problem of knowledge, of whether or not the "facts" related by Sam can be authenticated, calls his abilities

into question. As Sam readily admits, he is not the most capable of narrators:

> Add to this the obscurity of Watt's communications, the rapidity of his utterance and the eccentricities of his syntax, as elsewhere recorded. Add to this the material conditions in which these communications were made. Add to this the scant aptitude to receive of him to whom they were proposed. Add to this the scant aptitude to give of him to whom they were committed. And some idea will perhaps be obtained of the difficulties experienced in formulating, not only such matters as those here in question, but the entire body of Watt's experience, from the moment of his entering Mr. Knott's establishment to the moment of his leaving it. (P. 75)

Indeed, he does suffer from "scant aptitude." Sam, apparently ignorant of the normal world, often treats the most commonplace of actions as unfamiliar: "On his answering the door, as his habit was, when there was a knock at the door" (p. 70). Sam does not assume that answering a knock at a door is normal.

Sam appears to be incapable of controlling his material. Like Tristram Shandy's, his narrative often seems to get out of hand. Not only does he frequently quibble about inconsequent things, "But was a dog the same as the dog?" (p.96), but he also tends to lose all power over his material as in his treatment of the Lynch family. Such passages appear to be self-generating. [27]

That Sam is inadequate, if not downright incompetent, is also suggested in the layout and typography of the novel. Throughout Watt there are lacunae in the text indicated by question marks and such statements as "(Hiatus in MS)" and "(MS illegible)". At the end of Watt is an Addenda to which Sam attaches a footnote: "The following precious and illuminating material should be carefully studied. Only fatigue and disgust prevented its incorporation" (p. 247). Such footnotes appear throughout the novel and in one Sam admits: "The figures given here are incorrect. The consequent calculations are therefore doubly erroneous" (p. 104). In fact, as John Mood has shown, the majority of Sam's calculations are incorrect. Of the thirty-seven combinations, permutations, series and lists that are given in Watt, twenty-eight are wrong and, Mood argues, an examination of the manuscripts proves that Beckett purposely gave them as incorrect. [28]

These lacunae, mistakes, and deliberate inaccuracies suggest Sam's inadequacy; they are, moreover, self-consciously disruptive. The effect is to deliberately divert the reader's attention from Watt's story to the artificiality of Sam's narration. [29] If Watt can no longer make "a pillow of old words for a head," then neither can the reader:

> The narrator seems intent on severing the reader from his words. . . . These disruptions jolt us out of any semantic succor we have fabricated and insist that we, like Watt, become aware of the fragility of outer meaning. The structure of Watt refuses to let us enter imaginatively any secondary world of the story. . . . Our experience of Watt is disconcertingly similar to Watt's experience, as we too try to piece together fragmented incidents into some meaningful whole. 30

Beckett's deliberately disruptive techniques force the reader to realize the instability of the narration. Nothing in Watt can be accepted with certainty.

This problem of certainty revolves around Sam; there can be no doubt that he is an unreliable witness. But not only is Sam unreliable, so too is his material:

> And so always, when the impossibility of my knowing, of Watt's having known, what I know, seems absolute and insurmountable, and undeniable, and uncoercible, it could be shown that I know, because Watt told me, and that Watt knew, because someone told him, or because he found out for himself. For I know nothing, in this connexion, but what Watt told me. (PP. 127-28)

The impossibility of knowing is a problem not confined to Sam and Watt; the reader must also confront it. When is the reader to believe Sam, and when not? Fred Miller Robinson, for example, believes that Sam is lying or at least pulling the reader's leg when he claims to be strictly repeating Watt's words: "But the narrative

that follows . . . could not possibly have been conveyed in the inverted simplicities of Watt's discourse. Within a paragraph the word obnubilated turns up." [31] It is also frequently noted that the opening scene of Watt, related by an omniscient third person narrator, is an indication of Sam's questionable credibility. Sam insists that all he narrates has been learned from Watt, and yet Watt is not part of this scene until a good deal later. But this question of Sam's credibilty, of whether or not he is a reliable narrator, is fruitless. If in the world of Watt nothing can be known, then there can no longer be any way of distinguishing between truth and falsehood.[32] As Barbara Hardy puts it: "[Beckett] ought to make it impossible for critics ever again to use the terms reliable or unreliable narrator, without smiling. Of course all narrators are unreliable." [33] Such a self-conscious work as Watt forces the reader to remember that it is, after all, a work of fiction.

The nothingness of the world of Watt is also apparent in Sam's (or Sam Beckett's) narrative style. Hugh Kenner has shown that the style is an example of the art of "non-statement." [34] "No symbols where none intended" (p. 254) is the final statement of

the novel. Yet, like the tabulations of the solutions and objections for the problem of the dog, the statement appears informative but, on closer examination, says very little. The two negatives cancel out each other. The result is nothing, or is very close to nothing.

Much of Watt is written in sentences containing "symmetries of self-cancelation." Kenner analyzes the few sentences that describe Mrs. Gorman's arrangement:

> Mrs. Gorman called every Thursday, except when she was indisposed. Then she did not call, but stayed at home, in bed or in a comfortable chair, before the fire, if the weather was cold, and by the open window, if the weather was warm, and, if the weather was neither cold nor warm, by the closed window or by the empty hearth. So Thursday was the day that Watt preferred to all other days. Some prefer Sunday, others Monday, others Tuesday, others Wednesday, others Friday, others Saturday. But Watt preferred Thursday, because Mrs. Gorman called on Thursday. (PP. 139-40)

The passage ends where it begins: "Mrs. Gorman called on Thursday." Between, however, is indeterminacy; although "little symmetries of cause and effect, phenomenon and response" are described, how Mrs. Gorman chooses between a closed window and an empty hearth is left unstated. The reader is told less than first appears. As Kenner

explains it:

> The ritual symmetry of the Watt sentences in seeming to undo information chiefly undoes motivation, characteristically by rotating before us such an array of interchangeable options that no reason apparently remains why one should ever have been elected in preference to another. . . . [The narrator] deploys a tidy system of binary choices (cold or hot, bed or chair, called or did not call, disposed or indisposed) which affects to map out and explicate her doings but does not really succeed. 35

Like Watt, the reader assumes that there is meaning but, after reflection, finds less and less. The sentences "leave behind them odd residues of quasi-meaning." [36] The orderly and compact language conceals the void of nothingness at its centre.

This surface appearance of meaning is also present in the structure of Watt. Like the sentences that assert an order and yet yield nothing, much of the novel's plot is presented as if it too will yield something. As Watt tries to contain his experience through the structures of his logic so too does the reader seek patterns in the novel that will systematize much of its material. Watt, remarks Kenner, "repeatedly drives us to search after patterns, which turn out to be less neat than we should like." [37] The appearances of patterns frustrate the search for meaning rather than

satisfy it. According to H. Porter Abbott: "Beckett is dealing with a sense of order coupled with the sense of its absence, and there is no better structural device for this--nothing more teasing to the pattern-minded--than the trappings of allegory." [38] The reader senses the presence of paradigms and yet they reveal nothing; they do not fall into place in a tidy allegorical system. The reader is thus left in the same perplexed condition as Watt.

Abbott identifies six "traditional or archetypal patterns that are highly suggestive of allegory." The first is in the tradition of Ahab, Heathcliff, and Gatsby: the hero at first seen darkly. Watt is first presented at a distance; there is a mystery about Watt that gives him depth and importance. The second is the religious guides: Mr. Spiro, for example, is comparable to Dante's Virgil. He is also similar to the hermits and holy men encountered by Arthurian knights during their quests. The third is the perilous voyage: at the train station Watt crashes to the floor after bumping into the threatening porter and, on his return from Mr. Knott's, he is knocked unconscious by the swinging door of the waiting room. Lady McCann, for no apparent reason, also throws a stone at Watt which leaves a gash in his head. The fourth paradigm is the Chapel Perilous: Mr. Knott's house is a place of mystery

where Watt, having entered it by mysterious means, witnesses all sorts of miraculous events. But, like an inversion of the Percival figure, he asks all manner of questions. Next is the rejection from Paradise: Watt, dejected, is forced to leave Mr. Knott's household "with bowed head, and a bag in each hand, and his tears fell" (p. 208). Finally, the sixth is the fruits of the journey: Watt no longer needs to urinate every hour. [39]

This, to be sure, is mock allegory. However, as Abbott argues, it mocks not only the material of allegory but allegory itself. [40] Like Watt, who tries to superimpose his structure of logic onto nothingness, a number of critics have also imposed structures on Watt that offer fascinating yet finicky readings. Germaine Brée, although she does not present a specific allegorical system, finds Beckett's settings highly suggestive and significant. They are "related to medieval metaphysics: the universe of concentric zones, the symbolism of the circle and the center, of the elements and the seasons, of light and movement." [41] David Hesla, while acknowledging that "Watt is intransigent to a reduction to the simples of allegory," nevertheless believes that "Watt's journey to Knott's house is a fairly close parallel with the Stations of the Cross." Finding a clue in the statement that Watt, after being hit in

the head by Lady McCann's stone, continued "as soon as possible, on his way, or in his station" (p. 32), Hessla offers the following:

> Watt's departure from the tram is his first station, the condemnation to death. Watt is "weighed down" by the cross (the second station); he falls for the first time; he meets his mother, Lady McCann; he wipes his face with a "sudarium" (he has of course no Veronica to wipe it for him, just as he has no Simon of Cyrene, except possibly for Dum Spiro, editor of Crux, "the popular Catholic monthly"). Watt falls again (the seventh station); and in the singing he meets the women of Jerusalem. 42

This view of Watt as a Christ figure is, of course, bolstered by Sam's statement that Watt's "face was bloody, his hands also, and thorns were in his scalp. (His resemblance, at that moment, to the Christ believed by Bosch, then hanging in Trafalgar Square, was so striking, that I remarked it)" (p. 159).

Others have also been sensitive to the biblical echoes, Christian allusions, and religious atmosphere that permeate Mr. Knott and his house. Hélène Baldwin, concentrating on the decidedly religious associations in Watt's words,

> Of nought. To the source. To the teacher. To the temple. To him I brought. This emptied heart. These emptied hands. This mind ignoring. This body homeless. To love him my little reviled. My little rejected to have him. My little to learn him forgot. Abandoned my little to find him. (P. 166)

sees him on a religious quest. During his pilgrimage to Mr. Knott's, Watt encounters various exemplars of religious types. Spiro, for instance, is an example of literal-minded adherents of faith: "As they near the station, Spiro sticks his head out of the window and is driven back by 'a great gush of air.' Here the air, symbolizing the Holy Spirit, repels the literal and self-obsessed Spiro." [43] Watt is, Baldwin also argues, like a Christ figure and, because at the end of the novel a goat appears on the road (p. 245), he becomes a scapegoat. Michael Robinson views Watt in a similar manner: "Watt is treated as the scapegoat, the victim, as he-who-gets-slapped." [44] Yet, if so, it is now an empty ritual. Unlike Stevie's sacrifice in The Secret Agent which, although failed, is nevertheless presented as meaningful, Watt's is devoid of any potential significance. The final description of him is "the long wet dream with the hat and bags" (p. 246).

There are other readings that avoid the temptation to allegorize and yet nonetheless attempt to systematize Watt. Perhaps the most notable is Jacqeline Hoefer's. Believing Arsene's statement "Do not come down the ladder, Ifor, I haf taken it away" (p. 44) to be a reference to Wittgenstein's ladder in his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, she argues that Watt is a satire

of Wittgenstein's philosophy.[45] According to this view, Watt "wanders around Mr. Knott's residence rather like a frustrated Logical Positivist."[46] Beckett, however, has stated that he did not even read the Tractatus until many years after Watt was written.[47] Also noteworthy is G. C. Barnard's Samuel Beckett: A New Approach, in which he solemnly proves that all of Beckett's work is a study of various forms of schizophrenia. Watt is thus a catatonic and the account of his "stay in Mr. Knott's house in fact reproduces the subjective experience of a schizophrenic."[48] Another attempt is Sidney Warhaft's argument that the threne Watt listens to while lying in the ditch supplies the key to the novel.[49] Indeed, the tempting specificity of the number 52.285714 suggests that it might reveal some significance.[50] Finally, Raymond Federman (as well as Ruby Cohn) distinguishes various connections between Watt and the other characters. Hence there is Watt-Hackett, Watt-Knott, Watt-Sam, and Sam-Hackett (rather suggestive of Sam Beckett).[51] However, all these intricate connections between the characters become an increasingly knotted problem. Thus most of these various readings of Watt, rather than elucidating the novel, only succeed in creating more confusion.

Watt frustrates attempts to read the novel in the manner of a detective story. There is no answer to the mystery. All the paradigms, allusions, references and connections are given by Beckett as red herrings for, unlike a mystery novel which might also contain the odd false clue, there is no brilliant solution. As Watt learns, nothing can be made of nothing.

It is Beckett who has the last laugh. As Brée has put it: "Beckett is thus something of a contemporary Faust who, through the agency of his characters, indiscriminately, and with ferocious humor, undermines all our past and present attempts to give reality an intelligible structure, to 'think out' our human situation." [52] Indeed, Watt is a satire of all the devices used to make sense of reality. For example, the novel is an amalgam of literary parodies. Beckett imitates biblical language, as well as academic and pedantic, and parodies the styles of belles lettres and even Daniel Defoe: [53]

> Being now so near the fence, that I could have touched it with a stick, if I had wished, and so looking about me, like a mad creature, I perceived, beyond all possibility of error, that I was in the presence of one of those channels or straits described above, where the limit of my garden, and that of another, followed the same course, at so short a remove, the one from the other, and for so considerable a distance, that it was impossible for doubts not to arise, in a reasonable mind,

> regarding the sanity of the person
> responsible for the lay-out.
> Continuing my inspection, like one
> deprived of his senses, I observed
> with a distinctness that left no room
> for doubt, in the adjoining garden
> whom do you think but Watt, advancing
> backwards towards me. (PP. 158-59)

In Watt, the stable universe that allowed for the complacent self-sufficiency of a Robinson Crusoe has vanished. The diversity of Beckett's parodistic styles debunks the notion that language can imitate objective reality.

As with the literary parodies, Beckett lampoons the tradition of allegory, the assumption that meaning lies hidden beneath the surface of things. The mock allegory of the novel, however, also satirizes systematic interpretations of life. Theological as well as cosmological systems are perverted in the world of Watt. Mr. Knott, for example, is presented as an inaccessible primum mobile, a being who completes an annual revolution in his round bed. Yet, when Watt is finally allowed into the inner sanctum, Mr. Knott appears as a pseudo-God, a figure who barks "Exelmans! Cavendish! Habbakuk! Ecchymose!" Far from being the divine light who gives meaning to all things, he is the "Incarnation of the irrational who needs a witness to sustain him." [54] In fact, even Mr. Knott's eternal presence is questioned in the Addenda where it is noted that "Mr. Knott too was serial, in a vermicular series" (p. 253).

Finally, Watt is a satire of logic, of a system that searches for verifiable explanations. Watt is unable to contain the nothingness of his experience in Mr. Knott's household. Commenting on Watt's inabilities, Raymond Ferderman remarks: "Basically Watt is a narrative experiment which exploits the inadequacy of language, reason, and logic to reveal the failure of fiction as a means of apprehending the reality of the world." [55] Federman, however, is confusing Watt with the novel itself. Beckett's world is not the meaningless chaos that Ferderman implies. That would be too easy; as Beckett said, if there were only darkness, all would be clear. By equating Watt with Watt, Federman ignores one of the most important features of the novel, its comedy.

Arsene, during his "short statement," explains to Watt his theory of laughter. There are, according to Arsene, three types:

> The bitter, the hollow and--Haw! Haw! --the mirthless. The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. Not good! Not true! Well well. But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down the snout--Haw!--so. It is the laugh of laughs, the risus purus, the laugh laughing at the laugh,

> the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs--silence please--at that which is unhappy. (P. 48)

The laughter that Watt evokes is neither the ethical nor the intellectual laugh; it is the dianoetic laugh, the laugh which laughs at that which is unhappy. And, indeed, Watt is unhappy.

Yet, if Watt's efforts at the "ancient labour" were futile and wholly meaningless, the novel would be more of a tragedy. Watt might have failed, but the novel hasn't. For, by presenting Watt's predicament as a comedy, Beckett forces the reader to see it as a problem; a problem that has no easy solutions. For unlike traditional satire, his offers no alternatives. As he told Tom Driver, the mess remains but so too does the "ancient labour." The obligation to wrench meaning out of chaos, he implies, has been around for millennia and will probably remain.

Beckett's fiction has been described as "an affirmation of the negative." [56] Watt, it should be remembered, rarely smiles, and this only with discomfort. It has been suggested that what he lacks is not better perception and thought but the humour to live with his world. [57] Watt cannot laugh the risus purus. Yet the reader, although often in the same position as Watt, can. In presenting Watt as a comedy, Beckett accommodates the mess without simplifying it. In Proust, he writes of

an ideal art which would express the complexities of experience without violating the mystery: "When the object is perceived as . . . isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance, then and only then may it be a source of enchantment." [58] With the comedy of Watt, Beckett nears this goal.

Notes

[1] Tom Driver, "Beckett by the Madeleine," Columbia University Forum, 4 (Summer, 1961), 23.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Hugh Kenner, A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973), p. 77.

[4] Samuel Beckett, Endgame (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 57.

[5] Jerry Wasserman, "Watt's World of Words," Bucknell Review, 22, No. 2 (1976), 124.

[6] Beckett, Watt (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 7. All future references to this work are to this edition and will be given parenthetically within the text.

[7] Beckett, Proust (New York: Grove Press, 1931), pp. 7-8. Beckett, however, views this stability achieved through habit as "the guarantee of a dull inviolability."

[8] Eric P. Levy, Beckett and the Voice of Species: A Study of the Prose Fiction (Totawa, N. J.: Barnes & Noble, 1980), p. 29.

[9] Ruby Cohn, Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1962), p. 67.

[10] Wasserman, p. 125.

[11] Richard N. Coe, Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 42.

[12] Jacqueline Hoefer, "Watt," Perspective, CI, No. 3 (Autumn, 1959). Rpt. in Martin Esslin (ed.), Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 66-67.

[13] Ibid., p. 68.

[14] Wasserman, p. 132.

[15] J. E. Dearlove, Accommodating the Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Nonrelational Art (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1982), p. 43.

[16] H. Porter Abbott, The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), p. 65.

[17] Fred Miller Robinson, The Comedy of Language: Studies in Modern Comic Literature (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), p. 157.

[18] Wasserman, p. 134.

[19] Ibid., p. 135.

[20] Michael Robinson, The Long Sonata of the Dead: A Study of Samuel Beckett (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1969), p. 119.

[21] Richard L. Admussen, The Samuel Beckett Manuscripts (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979), pp. 90-91.

[22] Hoefer, however, believes that Watt's name is ironic: "Watt rigorously avoids being concerned with what-ness in a metaphysical sense," "Watt," p. 67.

[23] Levy, p. 32.

[24] For example, Raymond Federman, in his Journey to Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Early Fiction (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), regards it as a metaphor of Watt's futile quest (p. 131); G. C. Barnard, in his Samuel Beckett: A New Approach (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1970), sees it as "a symbol of the relationship between the mortal ego and the true self" (p. 23); Hélène Baldwin, in her Samuel Beckett's Real Silence (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), believes that the "picture is an icon representing God, the same image used by St. Augustine and by the medieval mystic Juliana of Norwich" (p. 101); and Fred Miller

Robinson views it as an image of Watt's revolving consciousness (p. 159).

[25] Olga Bernal, Langage et fiction dans le roman de Beckett (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 100.

[26] Cohn, p. 71.

[27] John Chalker, "The Satiric Shape of Watt," in Katharine Worth (ed.), Beckett the Shape Changer (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 30.

[28] John J. Mood, "'The Personal System'--Samuel Beckett's Watt," PMLA, 86, No. 2 (March, 1971), 263.

[29] Dearlove, p. 46.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Fred Miller Robinson, p. 164. The word appears on page 169 of Watt.

[32] Chalker, "there is no base within the work from which actions or events can be viewed [as authentic]," p. 25.

[33] Barbara Hardy, "The Dubious Consolations in Beckett's Fiction: Art, Love and Nature," in Beckett the Shape Changer, p. 111.

[34] Kenner, "Shades of Syntax," in Ruby Cohn (ed.), Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Criticism (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975), pp. 22-23.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Kenner, Reader's Guide, p. 76.

[38] Abbott, pp. 67-68.

[39] Ibid., pp. 68-70. To Abbott's list might be added the choir of mixed voices that Watt listens to while lying in the ditch and the strange hallucinatory figure he sees on the road. Both are in the tradition of the supernatural miracles witnessed by Arthur and his knights during the high feast of Pentecost; they signify the beginning of a quest.

[40] Ibid., p. 70.

[41] Germaine Brée, "The Strange World of Beckett's 'grand articulés'," trans. Margaret Guiton, in Melvin J. Friedman (ed.), Samuel Beckett Now (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 77.

[42] David H. Hesla, "The Shape of Chaos: A Reading of Beckett's Watt," Critique, VI, No. 1 (Spring, 1963), 102, 88-89.

[43] Baldwin, p. 90.

[44] Baldwin, p. 105; Michael Robinson, p. 114.

[45] Hoefer, "Watt," p. 75. Cohn continues the argument (Comic Gamut, p. 74, n15) as well as Federman, who sees a connection between Watt and Witt-genstein (p. 122).

[46] Levy, p. 27.

[47] John Fletcher, Samuel Beckett's Art (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967), p. 136.

[48] Barnard, p. 27. A much more fruitful psychoanalytic reading is the one offered by the neo-Freudian, Fernande Saint-Martin, in her Samuel Beckett et l'Universe de la Fiction (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1976); Knott, Watt's goal, is "un symbole primordiale dans toute l'oeuvre de Beckett . . . l'image du père" (p. 45).

[49] Sidney Warhaft, "Threne and Theme in Watt," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, IV, No. 3 (Autumn, 1963), 261.

[50] Kenner, in his Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study (New York: Grove Press, 1961), notes that the number "happens to reduce to decimal notation a leap year expressed in weeks" (p. 104).

[51] Federman, pp. 108-10; Cohn, pp. 82-83.

[52] Brée, p. 74.

[53] John Fletcher, The Novels of Samuel Beckett (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), p. 75.

[54] Chalker, p. 35.

[55] Federman, p. 119.

[56] Ibid., p. 6.

[57] H. Porter Abbott, "King Laugh: Beckett's Early Fiction," in Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Criticism, p. 61.

[58] Proust, p. 11.

Conclusion:

The Nostalgia for Unity

Watt does not merely present or record the experience of disorder, it involves the reader in movements between order and disorder. In the world of Watt neither state is absolute. Discussing Watt's "nostalgie des anciens mots," Bernal emphasizes that if he were not aware of the securities of logic and language, Watt would not be so estranged from his world:

> Si Watt n'avait pas connu la sécurité qu'offre le langage, il ne se sentirait pas si isolé, si étranger parmi les choses. C'est parce qu'il se souvient encore du mot, de l'ancien sens, qu'il éprouve ce malaise, cette solitude verbale. Il n'y a riens dans la littérature moderne d'aussi troublant que la nostalgie avec laquelle Watt désire ressaisir le langage, empêcher qu'il lui fasse défaut. 1

Watt's memory of a significant outer reality, of a world in which things could be named that would justify his experience, persists in his consciousness and serves as Beckett's measure of the distorted, indeterminate world he depicts. [2] Watt's nostalgia for a coherent universe is what Albert Camus has described as the nostalgia for unity, the longing for clarity.

Watt is presented in the absurd predicament. The

absurd, according to Camus, "is that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints, my nostalgia for unity [and] this fragmented universe." [3] It arises out of the confrontation of disparate elements:

> If I accuse an innocent man of a monstrous crime, if I tell a virtuous man that he has coveted his own sister, he will reply that this is absurd. His indignation has its comical aspect. But it also has its fundamental reason. The virtuous man illustrates by that reply the definitive antinomy existing between the deed I am attributing to him and his lifelong principles. "It's absurd" means "It's impossible" but also: "It's contradictory." . . . Likewise we shall deem a verdict absurd when we contrast it with the verdict the facts apparently dictated. And similarly a demonstration by the absurd is achieved by comparing the consequences of such a reasoning with the logical reality one wants to set up. In all these cases . . . the magnitude of the absurdity will be in direct ratio to the distance between the two terms of my comparison. . . . For each of them the absurdity springs from a comparison. I am thus justified in saying that the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression but that it bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it. The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation. [4]

The absurd is the comparison of two disparate elements; it is the clash of incompatibles. However, the absurd is, from another perspective, the grotesque.

Laughter, according to Baudelaire, was never heard in paradise: "it is certain that human laughter is intimately linked with the accident of an ancient Fall, of a debasement both physical and moral." [5] Holy books and angels never laugh, only fallen man does:

> And since laughter is essentially human, it is, in fact, essentially contradictory; that is to say that it is at once a token of an infinite grandeur and an infinite misery--the latter in relation to the absolute Being of whom man has an inkling, the former in relation to the beasts. It is from the perpetual collision of these two infinites that laughter is struck. 6

Baudelaire's image of laughing man as part angel and part beast is an image of the grotesque; it is a conflict of incongruent elements.

Like the absurd, the grotesque is a commingling of incompatibles; it is "a violent clash of opposites." [7] The grotesque, according to Wolfgang Kayser, is an unstable mixture of heterogeneous elements:

> By the word <u>grottesco</u> the Renaissance, which used it to designate a specific ornamental style suggested by antiquity, understood not only something playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally different from the familiar one--a world in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals and human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid. 8

The grotesque purposely confuses the natural hierarchy: the animate is coupled with the inanimate, the natural with the unnatural, and the real with the unreal. Yet, if a grotesque image is ambivalent, then so too is the reaction that it excites. Not only is it a clash of opposites, but it is also a clash of incompatible reactions. We are disgusted, repelled and sometimes horrified by such characters as Yundt, Angel Harper and Watt, and yet, at the same time, we laugh at them. They are disgusting but funny.

Because of this ambivalence, the grotesque has often been regarded as a literary mode particularly appropriate to the "modern situation." For example, Victor Hugo, in his preface to Cromwell, believed the grotesque to be the true modern style. Henceforth, he declared, it would be the hallmark of great literature.[9] Similarly, Philip Thomson, in a study of the grotesque, has noted its affinity to the sense of an unprecedented situation:

> The grotesque as a fundamentally ambivalent thing, as a violent clash of opposites, and hence, in some of its forms at least, is an appropriate expression of the problematical nature of existence. It is no accident that the grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation. 10

The profoundly disturbing effect that the grotesque can generate is a means of reflecting an inexplicable situation.

This disturbing quality of the grotesque is apparent in the manner in which it is presented. The grotesque, as many of its commentators have pointed out, is not fantastic, strange or surreal. Instead, it achieves its disquieting effects by concentrating on realistic devices. Kayser remarks on its emphasis on highly visual realistic details (and sees a possible connection between this feature and the origin of the grotesque in the visual arts),[11] and Thomson stresses "the physical nature of the events and descriptions presented--physical in each case in an immediate and vivid way."[12] Similarly, strange or bizarre events are often presented in a normal and ordinary tone of voice. Kafka's Gregor Samsa, for example, does not regard his metamorphosis into a cockroach as being in any way strange or extra-ordinary. He describes his situation in a matter of fact manner and instead worries about his job. In the grotesque the abnormal is treated as being perfectly normal; the marvelous is commonplace.

This presentation in grotesque literature of the strange as ordinary has unsettling effects on the reader. The grotesque displaces and disorients. Kayser notes

how more often than not the narrators of such literature present their material with very little emotion. [13] As with the detached narrators of The Secret Agent, Mrs. Reynolds and Watt, the effect is to dislocate the reader. As Leo Spitzer has argued in his study of modern grotesque works, the language of such writings establishes "an intermediate world between reality and irreality, between the nowhere that frightens and the 'here' that reassures." [14] The grotesque puzzles; it "opens the view into a chaos that is both horrible and ridiculous." [15]

The effect of such puzzlement is to question reality. As a form of comedy, grotesque works, according to Geoffrey Galt Harpham, criticize the sanctioned methods of perception and order: "They stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles." [16] Yet, if the grotesque questions the means of organizing the world, it also questions the literary methods meant to represent that reality. Because the grotesque evokes both laughter and disgust, it has a playful and capricious element. According to Ruskin, it is partly a product of a specially strong urge to play, invent, manipulate and, above all,

experiment. [17] Similarly, Mikhail Bakhtin believes that the grotesque is rooted in the carnival tradition of folk culture which mocks and derides all forms of established authority. Grotesque literature, "opposed to all that is ready-made and completed," seeks "a dynamic expression: it demands ever changing, playful, undefined forms. All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities." [18] Discussing this playfulness, Thomson sees a possible connection between it and much of twentieth century literature. Both reveal a strong desire to invent and experiment:

> In addition, highly inventive and imaginative, as well as strongly experimental, literature seems to gravitate towards the grotesque. . . . In connection with experimental literature the question arises as to what extent modern experimental techniques--stream of consciousness, point of view, the use of film techniques, proliferation of disparate styles and so on--themselves are related to the grotesque. 19

Gertrude Stein's radical mimesis, in its strict experimentation and mocking criticism of traditional methods of realistic representation, can be regarded as a form of the grotesque. Like other grotesque art, Mrs. Reynolds is a breaking down and restructuring of familiar reality.

Stein's methods dislocate and force the reader out of accustomed ways of perception; Mrs. Reynolds presents a radically different and, like The Secret Agent and Watt, an occasionally disturbing perspective. The familiar becomes unfamiliar.

Because the grotesque is not possible, according to Bakhtin, in a finished and stable world, it is finally unresolvable. [20] Camus states that "the absurd has meaning only in so far as it is not agreed to;" [21] similarly, the grotesque ceases to be grotesque when it no longer puzzles. Because it is essentially ambivalent, a conflict of incongruous elements, the grotesque is a mixture of the comic and repulsive in a problematic way. "The special impact of the grotesque," according to Thomson, "will be lacking if the conflict is resolved." As he sees it, it is the "unresolved nature of the grotesque that is important." [22]

Because of this unresolvability, the grotesque rarely has meaning, especially of the didactic sort. Kayser, for example, remarks on how Bosch's grotesque triptych, The Garden of Delights, has a symbolic presence about it. [23] Like Watt, there is the appearance of allegory, of a meaning hidden just beneath the surface. Yet, like other grotesque works, it does not divulge any symbolic meaning. The closer the viewer looks, the

less he finds. For instance, Bosch's human figures, even those being tortured in hell, show very little, if any, emotion. With this lack of designated significance, the effect is to disorient.

It is this disorientation that most commentators on the grotesque consider as especially suited to the sensibility of modern art. Arthur Clayborough, for example, believes that "the grotesque might be employed as a means of presenting the world in a new light without falsifying it." [24] Thus the problem set forth in Wittgenstein's proposition, "the truth is that we could not <u>say</u> what an 'illogical' world would look like," can be overcome. [25] The grotesque world, according to Bakhtin, is "a world that has <u>become</u> alienated." [26] The stress is on the transformation; not only does the familiar become unfamiliar but the abnormal also becomes normal. The world as presented in grotesque art has deviated but the norm is not forgotten. Like Watt, the nostalgia for unity remains.

The grotesque, as a specialized form of comedy, is a deviation from order. Because of its play on the concept of the normal, it intelligibly communicates disorder while preserving it. Something that diverges from the norm upsets us, but it also makes us laugh. "The comical," in the words of Friedrich Duerrenmatt,

"exists in forming what is formless, in creating order out of chaos." [27] Yet if, as in The Secret Agent, Mrs. Reynolds and Watt, it orders that chaos, comedy does not falsify it. Comedy expresses the problematic nature of existence without distorting it.

Notes

[1] Bernal, p. 28.

[2] Graff, p. 56.

[3] Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), p. 50.

[4] Ibid., p. 33.

[5] Charles Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter," in The Mirror of Art, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (Phaidon Press, 1955); rpt. in Corrigan, p. 451.

[6] Ibid., p. 455.

[7] Philip Thomson, The Grotesque, The Critical Idiom, 24 (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 5.

[8] Wolfgang Kayser, The Grotesque in Art and Lterature, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 21.

[9] As cited by Thomson, pp. 16-17.

[10] Thomson, p. 11.

[11] Kayser, p. 73.

[12] Thomson, p. 8.

[13] Kayser, p. 91.

[14] Leo Spitzer, Linguistics and Literary History, Essays in Stylistics, I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), p. 17; as cited by Kayser, p. 157.

[15] Kayser, p. 53.

[16] Geoffrey Galt Harpham, On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 3.

[17] John Ruskin, "Grotesque Renaissance," in The Stones of Venice, III, 3; cited by Thomson, p. 15.

[18] Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1968), p. 11.

[19] Thomson, p. 64.

[20] Bakhtin, p. 32.

[21] Camus, p. 35.

[22] Thomson, p. 21.

[23] Kayser, pp. 32-34.

[24] As cited by Thomson, p. 17.

[25] Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 3.031.

[26] Bakhtin, p. 48.

[27] Friedrich Duerrenmatt, "Problems of the Theatre," Tulane Drama Review, 3, no. 1 (1958), 19.

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